



# Library podcast

## Leslie Marmon Silko: 'The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir'

[0:00:05] **Podcast Announcer:** Welcome to the Seattle Public Library's podcasts of author readings and Library events, a series of readings, performances, lectures and discussions. Library podcasts are brought to you by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation to learn more about our programs and podcasts visit our website at [www.spl.org](http://www.spl.org). To learn how you can help the Library Foundation support the Seattle Public Library go to [foundation.spl.org](http://foundation.spl.org). The podcast you are about to hear was recorded in 2010.

[0:00:44] **Speaker 1:** Tonight, when this all night kind of came on the horizon, as a chance to have Leslie here. We thought it would be no better person to do this part of welcoming her and actually talking and engaging with her, then a writer she's and who they've known each other for many years, and that is Sherman Alexie. Sherman is actually, I think now, he is still writing books, but he is actually gotten into this role a little bit. We've helped out at Elliott Bay have had a few wonderful evenings. He hosting two writers one from Australia and the Netherlands who were here on a PEN tour and then the young poet Sherwin Suey (sp.?) back in the spring. So he's going to do that tonight with Leslie, they have actually done this before. So this isn't a totally new thing, but I'm not sure they would ever do the same thing twice. In fact, I know they wouldn't. So, beginning now, I will turn this over to Sherman. So please welcome, and of course the last times he's been here, the last time you seen this room, is as the newly

[0:01:50] awarded winner of the National Book Award since then a PEN/Faulkner award for his book of stories, and he also was recently the author of a great book of poems entitled Face, so please welcome Sherman. Alexie.

[0:02:10] **Sherman Alexie:** Hey, it's so great to be here. It's an honor to introduce and share the stage with one of my literary idols and good friends. Leslie Silko. You know, I didn't know Indians wrote books. I grew up on my reservation. I went to Gonzaga University for two years, but it wasn't until I was 20 years old and walked into a poetry writing class at Washington State University where my professor Alex Kuo, who's also an old friend of Leslie's saw me in the classroom and said are you Indian? Which yeah, which is a funny question now because of my life and where I travel. You know, I've become ambiguously ethnic. You know people generally think I'm half of whatever they are.  
[Laughter from audience.]

[0:03:06] But, you know, and 1987 in Pullman, Washington I was Crazy Horse. And Alex asked are you Indian, and I said, yes, and he said well, I just got this. And he handed me this anthology of contemporary Native American Poetry called Songs from This Earth on Turtles' Back, which was about 400 pages of poems, from about a hundred and five poets or so all across the country. Now, you know, people have these wild ideas about Indians like we all know each other. We kind of do, but but but you know, there is this perception, you know, it still persists even with my career the way it is now, you know, I'll still get asked those questions. I was in Philadelphia and somebody asked me a question about Navajo burial practices and I said, I don't know, you know, so I know more about wheat farmers from Lincoln County Washington, than I do about Navajo burial practices. And, the guy said well, you should know you're Indian. But, when I opened this book certainly there were a lot of Pacific Northwest writers and there are a lot

[0:04:12] of Montana writers, you know stuff I identified with- salmon and basketball. But there was this whole other world that was brand new to me, culturally speaking, and one of those writers that really just leapt off the page, just you know, roared off the page, was Leslie Silko. And, particularly one poem where in the poem, you know, these coyotes are hanging from a ledge, you know, gripping each other's tails in their mouths and and somebody farts and one of the coyote opens his mouth to say who farted, you know, which brings the whole damn thing collapsing and I remember reading that and thinking can you put this in a poem?

[0:05:00] Can you put a fart in a poem? Can you put a coyote farting in a poem. Now, I'd read poems but it was always you know, you know Donne and Dickinson and Whitman and you know, "I Sing The Body Electric." I don't remember, you know ode to fart, and but it was more than that. It was funny in a way that I recognized certainly from growing up on a reservation growing up in the Indian Community. But the poem itself ended with this brutal line about being pissed off for 500 years and you know, excuse me. And, and so it is this combination of humor and rage that just completely overwhelmed me and and and I just you know, I ran to Alex, the teacher, and said who is this person? And, plus the photo was really hot. So she's sitting there in a ribbon shirt with her legs crossed smiling, you know, and it's like hey and he said well, it's Leslie Silko. Then he started to hand me her novel Ceremony, which which is, which is you know, in my mind the finest piece of Native American literature that's ever been written. And, and

[0:06:08] remains the novel of the Native American literary world, and and just completely overwhelmed by her take on the world - her politics or the beauty of her language, or relationship with the Earth, her rugged and wild environmentalism, her political activism, her humor, her beauty. And and then Almanac of the Dead showed up and it was like 1,500 pages of apocalypse and and and and you know, and it's and rereading it in preparation for this, you know, you know, it's no accident. I mean that her wisdom and her ideas, that this apocalyptic novel, which covers seven hundred years, is really the story of what's happening now. And we'll get into in the conversation afterwards, but I thought, oh damn Leslie you knew this was going to happen. And and and her new book now the memoir which you know, I opened it up scared because she always scares the shit out of me because, in person she's a really funny, vivacious, gentle person, but on the page, sometimes you get scared. And and so I was scared Turquoise

[0:07:20] Ledge. You know, I was wondering is that like a scary thing - like some Indian standing on a ledge ready to jump. And and and then somebody told me there are rattlesnakes in it. I'm scared of rattlesnakes. So and and it's a beautiful book but the thing about it that's amazing, now, you know the big thing about Franzen and lately Jonathan Franzen lately the big cover the Time Magazine. I like Jonathan's books and all, that Jonathan, but he got that white guy treatment. You know that phrase, you know, Jonathan Franzen writes about the way we live now and I read that and thought you know, I don't live like Jonathan Franzen. I don't live like anybody in Jonathan Franzen's books and Leslie's memoir is really just about her circle, her ranch, her relationship with the desert around her home. It's a really it's a microcosm that with any great writing any great wisdom becomes a story about something much more. But it's by being so particular that she really ends up talking to all of us and and it's not about

[0:08:29] way we live now. It's about the way she lives now, and from that we can learn much. So with that she's going to come up and read a while and then afterwards she and I are going to have a conversation here. So thank you very much Leslie. [Applause by audience.]

[0:08:50] **Leslie Marmon Silko** : Thank you very much. I was so delighted when I saw Sherman's, I think it was *The Business*, read *The Business of Fancy Dancing*, but *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* that was just I was so excited because I knew I knew I can already tell that what was coming and he certainly has even more than surprised. I mean what I thought was coming, it's even been more wonderful and and so I'm just so happy to get to see Sherman and it's the the bright spot on my otherwise cruel book tour that has me catching taxis at five in the morning and flying around circling Seattle and flying back to Portland and then flying back. So anyway, I'm just delighted to be here tonight. And I think we'll have a lot of fun. So I don't want to hog up the time. I'll read a little bit. I'll just sort of sample around of course, this wa,s has been pointed out, I never noticed these things anymore. It's like as with all of my work, it's not purely linear, I think linear thinking is is the product of small minds and

[0:10:06] so it sort of goes around. So I will just sort of

[0:10:16] read here and there there's all sorts of things in there. There's a chapter on my ancestors. I think I'll read from that something really horrifying that I that I discovered something that I thought I knew but then I found out that I didn't really. That's always happening to me. So just to start off. I will the the premise of it or the way I got started was I started walking. I used to ride the hills in the Tucson mountains where I lived. I had horses and then after my last old horse died, oh, it was such a sad ordeal, I decided I wouldn't have any more horses. And then I decided for my cardiovascular health that I should walk the trails that I used to ride the the horse across. And so I started walking and pretty soon found out that that this sort of amazing meditative state of mind takes over and it was it was really wonderful. It was kind of a way to to get away from the conscious mind and more into it seem like a sort of opening for for all kinds of wonderful speculative things. And as I walked,

[0:11:31] I started to notice every now and then in the Tucson mountains, there are deposits of it would be like crude copper ore, and in the continuum of the formation of the minerals that make copper there are calcites, and then if there's water dripping on it over over a hundreds and hundreds of years, you begin to get the beginnings of turquoise. In the earlier stages the technical name for it is chrysocolla and I would pick up these they were just an iridescent, they would just stand out in the rest of this sort of light-colored volcanic ash and things like that. And so I started picking up these pieces of turquoise, I called them. And then I did some more research and found out that technically most of it was chrysocolla, but I hated the word chrysocolla sounds like Chrissy Cola, or some kind of soft drink. So for the purposes of The Turquoise Ledge, I decided I would call it all turquoise. In the old days people didn't, people didn't they called it soft turquoise. They thought it was

[0:12:46] turquoise too. And and it is really. Well, maybe if I start reading I can get the witches out of the mic the microphone. Okay, so I'm going to start here with it just a little snippet of the turquoise. On my walk this morning. I picked up a rock the size of my two fingers with speckles and threads of turquoise. The rock is light greenish gray basalt and the turquoise is a light green blue that collected in a triangular crease near the lower middle of the rock. On the far right end midpoint there is a raisin of iron ore. Penguin, let me do the little they call them ornaments the little that separate little sections. And so I have a little bugs there's bugs crawling all over. These are my drawings of bugs that we used. This morning instead of coming into work on the manuscript I sat in the shade on the front porch and watch the Mesquite lizard catch the tiny gnats that swarmed around the lower the lower limb of the big Mesquite tree. The lizard had lovely patterns of ivory and copper over brown and

[0:13:59] darker Shades that mimic the bark of a Mesquite tree. Suddenly lizard moved then turned and bounced up and down on its front legs to assert his dominance over his territory, but why I looked around and about 8 feet away on the trunk of the smaller Mesquite tree I saw a larger spiny desert lizard. I call it a sky lizard because of its brilliant blue color. Sky lizards like to sit at the top of the stucco walls of my house in camouflage, their blue silhouettes hidden in the blue of the sky. The spiny lizard intensified the brightness of his iridescent turquoise blue and he puffed up his spiny neck with its elegant black necklace marking. Fat with all the gnats he ate in the tree. His tail was a luminous pale turquoise blue the color of the summer sky overhead. His ribs and chest were intense turquoise. Of the greatest substance in purity, the blue on his head and his back was the shade of lapis lazuli. The Mesquite lizard appeared unconcerned about the puffed-up spiny lizard and instead watched the Gila

[0:15:13] woodpecker that flooded around the hummingbird feeder until it managed to find a place for its claw, so it could tip the feeder and its contents into its beak. I left the house early as the sun was still behind the Catalina mountains to the east. The air was cool and I could smell just a hint of the dampness the last trace of the sudden rainstorm of a few weeks ago. The scent of the greasewood was pervasive because the bushes are covered with tiny waxy yellow flowers. A few orange carmine blossoms remain stored outside the ant palaces, but I saw no ants. In an earlier section, I noticed how the ants go. And when the when the red orange blossoms of the ocotilloes drop, the ants gather them and they store them outside the entrance to their hills for a few days, and they interlock the petals so that it even if wind or rain or a storm come these petals that they've gathered, don't scatter.

It's pretty amazing. So anyway, that's a that's a reference. A few a few of their and then they gradually move

[0:16:34] their their blossoms inside at the ant hill, which had been trampled by humans and horses earlier in the month. I found the damage had been, had been repaired by a rainstorm which smooth the way the boot prints and hoof prints into a concentric circular pattern. I saw seven or eight ants working on the entrance to arrange the grains of sand the rain storm brought, to arrange the grains of the grains of sand the rain storm brought before it got too hot. Those ants have to go in and they sort of close the door as the heat of the day comes on. I heard loud noises of rocks clattering in the nearby arroyo where I had seen the giant rattlesnake. I stopped and stood still, and I heard six or seven large mule deer does stare at me uncertain whether they should run. I went on my way at once to reassure them I was no threat. All the trees and and shrubs are bright green and many are blossoming again. Each rainstorm in the Sonoran Desert brings another springtime of wildflowers and cactus blossoms,

[0:17:48] even if it only lasts two weeks, In the big arroyo, right after the rain, I found three pieces of turquoise rock uncovered by the runoff, but since then I've not found any. I noticed the flood water left a layer of dove gray clay on the pebbles and rocks, so the turquoise isn't as visible. To wash off the clay, a gentle steady rain is needed, then I'll be able to spot the turquoise rocks again. Each time the trail went down hill and across even the smallest arroyo, the cool moist air rushed past my face in the most delicious manner. I felt my skin drink it in, the cool air held subtle perfumes of cat's claw in Mesquite that blossomed following the rain. In the big arroyo, the flow of cool air had much more of a woody green herbal scent. A short distance past the Gila monster mine, I caught a flash of turquoise out of the corner of my eye. I picked up a piece of orange quartzite the size of my fist with a streak of turquoise across its face. This was quite a distance from the big arroyo where

[0:19:03] I imagined the ledge of turquoise to be, so it served as a reminder turquoise may be found anywhere in the hills, where there may be, where there may be more than one turquoise ledge. And that gets back to the title when I started out I was imagining just just one place where these pieces of rock were breaking off. And then, finally by the end, I figured out that my house is on a hill that has some of those deposits and some some of that very soft soft turquoise. In the arroyo, I noticed a small rectangular turquoise cabochon of a very nice sky blue and green. I brought it home, but I lost it for a while under papers and notes on my writing desk. When I located it again I took a closer look at it, and I realized one side resembled the turquoise mask of Tlaloc and, Tlaloc is the Nahuatl, Nahuatl Rain God and I got very interested in the in Nahuatl because Nahuatl or Aztec, that language is, the linguist talk about the Uto-Aztec and language groups and that pretty much includes all of the

[0:20:26] Indigenous tribes from Guatemala, all the way up to the Canadian border. Only the Athabaskan speakers are outside of this family, and the Hopi, my friends at Hopi, tell me that the Hopi language is all as almost the same is as Nahuatl. And I also, in 2006, the Hopi made a sacred run from Hotevilla, Second Mesa all the way to Mexico City to the stone statue of Tlaloc. And they the they had to run the whole distance from up in northern Arizona all the way to Mexico City. And that year, in 2006, after they made their run it broke the drought and we had wonderful rain into 2006 and

2007. And that that connection between the Hopi and the Nahuatl people the Nahuatl language is very important. So I found that there's not one, but two English/Nahuatl dictionaries. And so I've gotten very interested in it. I can't pronounce Nahuatl at all, but you don't have to be able to pronounce it to appreciate the way the words are generated, how how the language works, and so I couldn't resist

[0:22:03] putting Nahuatl words in here. So there's other sections which I which I won't go to but anyway, that's that's why I mention Tlaloc, and Tlaloc, his color is turquoise. So that's that's how he comes in there, I also wrote about. So now I'm going to go to this the section called "Ancestors" to to read to you, and this it was rather shocking. I got started working on on this book and I wanted to write about Juana she was a very very important to my Grandma Lillie. My father's mother Grandma Lillie is Mexico was Mexican, Texas Indian and white. And her family, Grandma Lillie was born in Los Lunas, New Mexico and her mother was from one of the Mercantil families, one of the well-off Mexican families in Los Lunas. And Juana had been a slave. That's what grandma Lillie told me. She had been sold into slavery as a little girl and she could never go back to to her people because she didn't know where the slave hunters had had snatched her from and of course, she no, she could not, she could no longer speak the

[0:23:38] Navajo or Dine language. So I started to, I wanted to find out a little bit more about Juana. I always had the impression that she came to work for the family after the 13th amendment was passed in 1865. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was supposed to outlaw slavery and interesting to find out that it didn't outlaw Indian slavery, that Indian slavery continued just into the 20th century. And I had a student years ago at the University of New Mexico who remembered a very old man that his family took care of and that old man had been kidnapped as a little boy and sold into well, they called them servants, but they were basically slaves. So I started asking questions and I learned something really horrible that that you know, I found out that I didn't know everything there was to know about about Juana. So let me read this this section. Recently I learned something more about Grandma Lillie's mother's people are Los Lunas relatives, I'm sure they're delighted

[0:24:58] at this book, and their connection with the whipping of young children. All these years I thought I knew the whole story, but I was wrong. Long before I knew anything about the Indian slave trade in New Mexico, I'd heard Grandma Lillie's stories about Juana, the Navajo captive who lived with them and cared for them when they were children. One Memorial Day, when I was 12 or 13, Grandma Lillie asked me to go with her to take flowers to old Juana's grave. She told me Juana died around 1920 when she was more than a hundred years old. We filled the clean coffee cans, we filled clean coffee cans with water, then we cut some roses and lilacs from Grandma A'mooh's yard because those were the only fresh flowers to be found. Grandma Lillie drove us to the south side of Laguna Village and then down the older road near the old bridge across the river. A low, a low wall of black lava rock was partially buried in the pale gray river sand that covered an ancient flood plain. In the corners

[0:26:07] of the wall dry weeds and scraps of paper and debris formed drifts. The graves were from the time when the Laguna people didn't use carved gravestones, but flat pieces of sandstone or slate or black lava stones. I seem to remember the remains of a few wooden crosses scattered about. This was an old cemetery that was no longer used. She hadn't brought flowers to Juana in a while, but then that year for some reason she decided to do it. Grandma Lillie took a little while to get her bearings among the piles of stone and small dunes of sand that shifted in the graveyard with every wind. Then she located the five dark lava stones the size of cantaloupes that marked Juana's grave. I helped Grandma Lillie clear away the tumbleweeds tangled with, each tangled with other debris, and she talked about old Juana while we worked. Juana had been captured by the Mexican slave catchers when she was just a little girl. Years later when Lincoln freed the slaves, it was already too late for poor Juana, 30 years

[0:27:17] or more had passed and she no longer spoke the Navajo language, and she did not know where she had been stolen from. Grandma Lillie gave me the impression Juana came to work for their family when she was an adult after Lincoln's Proclamation. Actually, the 13th Amendment, Lincoln's Proclamation just freed slaves in the south. But anyway after Lincoln's Proclamation because she had no place to go, Grandma Lillie said Juana was the one who really mothered them not Great-Grandma Helen. That would be, Grandma Helen was Grandma Lillie's mother. In her 80s old Juana raised my great, raised my Grandma Lillie and all her sisters and brothers because Great-Grandma Helen followed the practices of the wealthy Mexican women at the time, which meant she took to her bedroom as soon she was pregnant, and did not leave her bedroom again until two months after the birth. Grandma Lillie had a live-in sisters and brothers and two who did not survive. So Grandma Helen seldom left her bedroom. Juana was the who

[0:28:25] cared for them while their mother awaited another birth. Juana bathed them and fed them, rocked them and held them when they were sick or scared, not their mother. Juana was in her 80s by the time Grandma Lillie was born. I remember my Great Grandma Helen vividly. She always wore a long black cardigan over her black dress and she rolled her own cigarettes from a bag of tobacco as she gossiped in Spanish with my grandma and her sisters Lorena and Marie. I don't remember her greeting us or hugging us. She hardly seemed to notice us great-grandchildren. She was so different from our beloved great-grandma A'mooh that we children were a little afraid of her. Great-Grandma Helen was born to Josephine Romero whose mother was a Luna, one of the founding families of Los Lunas, New Mexico. The Romeros were another founding family. Josephine Romero had married a Whittington, the son of an English merchant, who married the daughter of the Chavez family. Grandma Lillie always called her grandmother,

[0:29:31] Josephine Romero, Grandma "Whip" because she wore a black braided leather belt around her waist which she could remove quickly to use as a whip for naughty children. My father remembers Grandma Whip too. He said they called her Grandma Whip because as children, whenever they visited her, the first thing she did when they came into the house was to warn them not to touch anything in her house by saying, "Grandma whip! Grandma whip if you touch." The whippings that were part of child-rearing in Grandma Lillie's family included my father, and finally my sisters and me. The whippings were a legacy from Grandma Whip and her family. And I'm going to just sort of skip

over that. In 2006, well, no, I'll go ahead and read it. In 2006, I was asked to write a foreword to a book called corrido, or ballad that was composed in 1882 in the Mexican community of Cubero near Laguna. The corrido was about a Mexican woman, Placida Romero, no relation,

[0:30:44] to the other Romeros, or maybe who knows. Whose husband was killed and she and her baby kidnapped by a band of Apaches raiders. It is likely the Apaches chose the Cubero area deliberately because Cubero had long been the site of slave markets. Placida Romero was taken back to Chihuahua by the Apache warriors where she was held for 49 days, and so badly mistreated that the Apache women felt sorry for the Mexican woman and gave her clothing, food and even a burro to aid her escape. Of course, the ballad written afterward made no mention of the compassion and considerable bravery of the Apache women who helped Placida escape. That angered me because at the time they helped her escape, Apache women and children were being murdered by Mexican and Americans alike for the bounty on their scalps. Yet, the Apache women who helped Placida escape did not let the genocide destroy their human decency. I wanted to put the incident into historical perspective. Placida Romero was a captive for

[0:31:54] 49 days and then she got to go home. Juana was a captive for almost a hundred years and she never got to go home. To prepare to write about the captives, I reread L.R. Bailey's scholarly work Indian Slave Trade in the Southwest first published in 1964. Of course, it's out of print. It's so horrifying that no one's in a rush. I'm trying to get the University of Arizona press to reprint it. Though I'd read it before I'd conveniently forgotten some of the more horrendous details. The Spanish governors of New Mexico, encouraged and participated in the Indian slave trade; it was their way of keeping the Pueblos, Navajos and Apaches at war with one another so they would not unite against the Spaniards as they had in 1680. After the fur trade collapsed, the rendezvous held at river crossings from Taos to Tucson became slave markets where Indian captives were traded for whiskey and gunpowder. The captives were mostly young children, primarily young girls because they were less likely to try to escape.

[0:33:09] At the slave markets, in drunken exhibitions, the slave traders raped the young Indian girls. The Catholic Church participated in the slave trade by possessing, by possessing young Indian "servants" (and servants, and I have included quotation marks) for labor and by baptizing the captives. Baptismal records show that from 1700 to 1780, eight hundred Apache children were baptized as "servants" to the households of Spaniards in New Mexico. At the Catholic church at Laguna Pueblo, baptismal records revealed that the Spanish rewarded the Pueblos who accompanied them on military actions against the Navajos with young captives. More money could be made from one slave hunting expedition of two or three weeks, than could be made in one year of subsistence farming or ranching in New Mexico. When the U.S. authorities took the New Mexico territory from Mexico in 1846, the U.S. officials made attempts to stop the Indian slave trade, but the wealthy Mexican families resisted and even the U.S. authorities kept Indian "servants."

[0:34:26] As I reread Bailey's book. I came across the account of a young Navajo woman released by U.S. soldiers from her captivity with a Mexican family in 1852. The young Navajo woman complained to the U.S. military officer that the Mexican family stripped her naked and whipped her every day.

Whipping slaves, it seems, was a common perversion among the founding families of New Mexico. I happened to mention to my father that I wanted to write about Juana, but I wasn't really sure when or how she came to work for Grandma Lillie's family. That was when my father told me what Grandma Lillie never told me. My father told me so offhandedly, it angered me; I could tell he was ashamed and the off-handed manner was his way to cover his shame. Four young Navajo sisters were captured by the Spanish slave hunters during the Spanish governor's 1823 military campaign against the Navajos in New Mexico. Juana, who was four or five, was the youngest. The four captives came into the possession of Grandma Whip's brother. Did he buy the young sisters

[0:35:35] from a slave trader, or were they loot he got for volunteering to accompany the Spanish troops on the assault? Did someone owe him a gambling debt and give him the little girls as payment, or were they a bribe to curry his favor? If Grandma Whip was quick to take off the leather belt to whip her small grandchildren imagine what Grandma Whip's brother was like. He must have been the Devil himself with the whip on the little Navajo girls. After he whipped the little Navajo girls, what other perversions? Was he one of those slave dealers who participated in the drunken, public rapes of young Indian girls at the slave markets? His abuse was unbearable, so the three older girls poisoned their torturer. With the son of two prominent Los Lunas family's dead at the hands of Indian "servants," the local authorities could not afford delay, copycats had to be discouraged immediately. The three young Navajo girls were hanged at once only the youngest, Juana, was spared. Did other wealthy families of Los Lunas send their

[0:36:46] Indian "servants" to watch the hangings that day as a precaution? Did they make little Juana watch her sisters die? Did Juana understand then her last links to her family and people died with her sisters, and there would be no reunions for her? From her poisoned brother Grandma Whip inherited the only remaining Navajo child to be her "servant." Poor Juana came to be part of the strange cruel family of Grandma Whip and her husband the Mexican with the English surname. Both my father and Grandma Lillie told me about the huge ring of keys Grandma Whip wore on the belt around her waist. Every door, every closet, every cabinet, cupboard and drawer in Grandma Whip's house was locked at all times. When they visited and needed sugar for their coffee Grandma Whip had to search among dozens of keys before she unlocked the cupboard with the sugar bowl. Grandma. Lillie said that all the locks and keys were because Grandma Whip didn't want the "servants" to steal things. But maybe Grandma Whip wanted to make

[0:37:56] sure the rat poison stayed out of the sugar bowl. So I think here I would rather sit down and start get to have our dialogue and time with Sherman, and with you in the audience. So I won't read you one of I was going to read to you one of my many rattlesnake stories and encounters. They are some of my best friends, and as time goes by and the failed State of Arizona slides farther into madness, I realize more than ever how I appreciate the genteel manners and gentle souls of the rattlesnakes. And and and so I'll just stop with that and say that when we were editing this book my editor, Paul Slovak, who was very good. At the beginning, he was saying too many rattlesnakes, too many rattlesnakes! So we trimmed them back a bit. But anyway, I want to stop here so that Sherman and I can and we can start our dialogue.

[0:39:03] **Sherman Alexie:** I agree with your editor. One rattlesnake is too many rattlesnakes. Hello again. Yeah, you know listening to that after I remember reading that a week ago when I finished your book it reminded me a few years ago my wife, who is Hidatsa, Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi, her tribe is doing a more extensive oral history, genealogical study. And for about a month my wife, the tribe told my wife that she was descended from Sacagawea. Her family was directly descended from Sacagawea. but then the month later they said they had gotten it mixed up a bit, and that she was descended from the Hidatsas who enslaved Sacagawea. So she went from you know, adventuring pioneering hero, to descendant of the owners of the adventuring pioneering hero. But it reminded me and thinking about your book the way in which as you referenced getting in trouble - that our histories as Natives, I think, get perceived as being only a victim only the oppressed when it was far more complicated than that. Your ancestry is

[0:40:23] very cosmopolitan. That's one of the things that was really interesting in the book and what I knew about you beforehand. I mean, I have white ancestors, but they all died before I was born which is really weird to think that the Indians outlived the white people at least in my family. So but your cosmopolitan multi-ethnic background is really fascinating to me. So could you speak to that a little bit?

[0:40:45] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Well, yes. I am. I'm on my mother's side, I'm Cherokee and Great Grandpa Wood was born on one of the what four or five removals, Cherokee removals, or Trails of Tears. And of course in Almanac of the Dead I wrote about perhaps the Cherokees because many of them were slaveholders of African African slaves. That there might have been some kind of cosmic payback that they had to undergo, the removal. There was a little bit of a different, the slave keeping that the Indigenous people did when they would make raids and bring home slaves was a little bit different. They they

[0:41:31] actually integrated the children into the families, and clans adopted them, and then they would if they were small children. Um, they would grow up and they would later get married and be part of the community so that which is why a lot of Native American people have these mixed ancestry. He's up in Navajo country. Sometimes the Navajos had Pueblo kids and vice versa. And so that's where you and the families would keep track of that. They didn't try to obliterate it, and it was a it was a little bit different than the slavery that came with the fur traders and and the Europeans. They commodified slave taking, in a way that the Indigenous people hadn't thought of using slaves as as commodity, as as money or in trade. And when they became commodified, that's when you know and and removed forever and they were constantly sending them all the way down to Mexico City. So there is you know, it's very complicated and there were certainly there certainly were probably I know in New Mexico a number

[0:42:49] of the Mexican families remember being kind to their slaves, and they'll be very upset. and but slavery is such an ugly thing that I'm not afraid. I think that the for the most part because they were treated as commodities, and because the Catholic Church Church encouraged whipping. That that the circumstance for the Navajo and Apache slaves was much more horrific. And, I used to wonder why when I went to Taos and Santa Fe, I just have these awful feelings or when I arrived in

Tucson what was wrong what had happened? And I really think that was part of the sort of nasty feeling. Sometimes when you're in these places El Paso, Albuquerque, these are all scenes of these Indian slave markets. And in even little dinky towns that are practically ghost towns now like Cubero where Placida Romero was kidnapped from, in its heyday there was a Spanish fort there and they had huge slave markets. And Abiquiu, New Mexico were Georgia O'Keeffe settled - that was a big slave market. And of course, that was why

[0:44:13] those Apache warriors came all the way up from Chihuahua to hit Cubero because so many of the Apache children had been sold at slave markets there. So yeah, it's a very, it's the we're just beginning to see, you know, the depth and complexity of what happened because of course only one side of the story has pretty much been told up until now.

[0:44:40] **Sherman Alexie:** Yeah, and leading, going with that the idea that your ancestry, all of our ancestry, has been lived on both sides of the Mexican-American border. Which you know, you're living in Arizona and Tucson has becomes more contentious, I guess you'd say, than usual lately. That always makes me giggle to think of people against immigration. Wish we'd had tougher immigration laws ourselves, but -[Laughter from audience.]

[0:45:06] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Yes, they were quite lax. They were quite lax.

[0:45:15] **Sherman Alexie:** You know the thing, I was driving today and I was with my sons and you know, it's funny I drive and talk to them some, talking to them about immigration laws. That's one of the things when my book gets banned, you know, my books get banged among young folks and people ask me - Do you let your kids read your books? I'd say yeah, I wish they would. But, but we have all these conversations. We were talking about this and and immigration and anti-immigration and and it occurred to me and I was thinking about Almanac of the Dead, it occurred to me that this anti-immigration stuff it really only applies to south of the border. Nobody ever talks about the Russian immigration problem or the, or the you know, Canadian immigration problems. You know all those you know fuckers coming and taking our jobs in comedy, but

[0:46:05] that it really isn't anti-immigration. It's actually anti-Indigenous.

[0:46:09] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Yeah, it's racist, it's racism and it wears its little coat as if being anti-immigrant, probably always was kind of racist except maybe well, well it was. But in this case, especially that's what it is. And so it's really important for people to understand that we have to, we have to, we have to confront this because the way that they've dehumanized the people from the south - these are Indian people, Mestizo people the poorest people in Mexico. Or, the people that come north and they're Indians and this is a continuation of the Indian War. This is a continuation of wiping Indians off the face of the Earth. Over 300 illegal immigrants died in the desert. That's 300 Indian women, children. It's a very hard to track and this this this flow of people North and South has gone on for thousands and thousands of years. The Uto-Aztecan language as I was saying earlier the the members of the culture and language groups run from

[0:47:22] all the way to the Canadian border. The people have a right to come. They are there are sisters and brothers. They're not, illegal aliens that that term dehumanizes and the way that they don't care when they find the bodies in the desert. They never, they don't autopsy them to see if they were murdered or died of natural causes. So it's sort of an open open, open season on these Indian people and the drawing of the border, you know, a hundred and fifty seven years ago Tucson, El Paso, Las Cruces they were in Mexico. I mean this this but there's so much ignorance about who the people are because immediately they're called aliens and illegal, as if people can in, any person can be made illegal. But, what's more heinous is is these recent from Europe or the Neo-Nazi people that are doing you know, spouting all of this hatred and almost exhorting people to go shoot them before they come. This is just the Indian Wars continuing and we, you know, we've got to get the word out there that

[0:48:44] this is racist. That these Indian people have a actually a superior right to cross that border, and to come in. And that human beings, all borders, I mean look at the European Union - they were moving in that direction. We human beings are parts of nature. We need sometimes to migrate just like the caribou and other animals. Sometimes have to leave because natural circumstances, you know, fires or droughts, or something in order to remain healthy and and to go on migrations have to occur. And it's especially cruel and wrong and actually in violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to interfere with this flow of people. And it bothers me that because of our crappy public education system and even crappier Bureau of Indian Affairs education that a lot of, a lot of us north of the border don't understand our relationship, don't understand that the Mayan people have the twin brothers, spider-woman, corn mother, you can tell. The Hopi people in northern Arizona. Their language is almost identical

[0:50:08] to Nahuatl in Mexico City. So we've got to, we've got to face up to this because if the neo-nazis go down there and are allowed to pretty much trample these poor, these people who are so desperate. that they'll cross the terrible desert. And, if we allow that it's just a short step to policemen here thinking they can shoot homeless Indians. We really have to be careful about this and so I'm very concerned about it. And, I've been talking at length about it because people of conscience everywhere have to be aware of what's going on and it's just been getting uglier and uglier. I can't believe that the Pinal County Sheriff, Sheriff Babue is his name, but it must be a German name because he's the one that allows the neo-nazis to carry loaded guns and patrol the desert for illegal aliens. And the the federal authorities don't say much either. I've been disappointed in that it's as if everybody is cowering in front of these. And you know, if we're not careful it's sort of like wildfire. I'm afraid

[0:51:30] it will get out of control and they'll be horrific horrific results. [Applause from audience.]

[0:51:45] **Sherman Alexie:** Yeah inside of that is the kind of the concept of cultural migration, it's not just geographical. In your book, when you talk about Nahuatl, we're all going to be speaking that at one point and that

[0:51:55] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** 500 years from now.

[0:51:56] **Sherman Alexie:** We'll all be speaking. I read that I thought oh, no, I already feel guilty that I don't speak Spanish. And then you talk about Chinese being the international language of commerce, and politics, and finance. That it's going to be especially since China owns us actually, so that's right. And and I find it fascinating. Of course as we are, you know descended from Asians, that Asians will take over again and and and it reminds me of what Sharron Angle said in Nevada last night, or this week. I don't know if you read that she was visiting a high school and was trying to defend her use of ambiguously ethnic bad guys in one of her political ads. And you know, people are saying, you know, they were supposed to be evil Chicanos and she was saying they were just evil Americans, I guess.

[0:52:47] But, she remarked to this room full of high school Chicano kids that some of you look more Asian to me anyway.

[0:52:56] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Well, you know, it just amazes me the length of the ignorance and stupidity that are on display every day and moreover the appetite that the American public has for this kind of display is quite dismaying to me.

[0:53:16] **Sherman Alexie:** [Sherman Alexie laughs.] She says with a smile. Yeah makes for good writing though.

[0:53:21] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Absolutely.

[0:53:23] **Sherman Alexie:** Oh, you know one of the ways, as I've referenced in your introduction, one of the things about the book that's amazing to me is how precise the focus is. How microscopic, in a way just your neighborhood, your you know, your neighborhood and your neighbors, you know. Godzilla lizards and cockroaches and rattlesnakes and and... you know, as I was reading it, and thinking about it, I kept thinking I kept thinking, you know, it was like Dickinson, it was like Dickinson, and then lo and behold bang! You start talking about Emily Dickinson, you know, one of the great insults against her has always been, there's a notion that her world was so limited. That you know, all she ever did was look out the window and write, you know 900 awesome fucking poems later.

[0:54:12] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Thousands.

[0:54:12] **Sherman Alexie:** Yeah. Yeah, you know, I think that was a pretty damn good window. [Laughter from audience.] Now and you know, that's how I felt about your book. I mean in a way your window, you were looking out one window. Now was Dickinson and early influence? Or you know, I thought back and I Googled you - which is always interesting to Google and other Indian, you know looking for Dickinson references and I couldn't find them. So when did that happen for you?

[0:54:41] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Well, of course, I really as an undergraduate when I read her, and I was just amazed. I'm still amazed at the haunting mystery of many of her poems, and while I was working on this book. I started thinking about her probably, at least I wasn't consciously seeing that connection, of course later I saw it, and I embraced it because I thought - yes, that's the way to get a

lot of poems written is to stay at home and not go anywhere, and that's my belief too. [Sherman Alexie laughs.] And in fact when there was, there was all this hoopla about oh - Silko's first book in 10 years. And actually I when Publishers Weekly, when the contract was signed it said, you know the first book contract she signed in eight years. So I consciously thought part of it

[0:55:33] consciously tried to report to people what I was doing, you know, I was having a great time. I was watching the hummingbirds. I was talking to the, talking to the bees. But no, it is something that we don't get to do anymore, and especially in this country. And there are reasons that capitalism loves to move workers around, people get transferred and moved, but it also destroys any chance for political action in a community on behalf of the workers. And because they're always getting moved around, and this has become ingrained in the U.S. this idea of being transferred so that even wealthy executives get moved around. And this constant moving is not, you wouldn't do that with wild wild animals are other living beings, and I don't think it's good for humans in anyway, including socially. And so you can't learn about, you can't learn a place. And so I've had the privilege, though I've had to fight tenaciously to be able to do it, financially to be able to stay in one spot and to spend a lot of

[0:56:47] time observing, and so I really believe that not moving. That people in this country, that that we've got to stop being, we don't naturally come by this kind of uprooting all the time and then it does damage,

[0:57:08] It's a very wasteful sort of thing, this moving people around. It's only done too, at the pleasure of the of the big corporations. It's not not good for anyone but for their bottom line,.So I tried, without stating all of these things, just with this focus to implicitly say look, you know, we don't have to always be rushing around or we don't have to get our knowledge from others. If we will just pay attention to where we are and spend some time we can learn things and we can know things without having experts mediate. And of course, to to to begin to to enjoy watching little golden cockroaches. They're really beautiful. They don't look like the the smudgy, big, scary ones in the city. They're they're very beautiful the ones in the Sonoran Desert. But if if we were to raise children and and if we were to quit moving around and everyone were to stay in the same place and people would start to pay attention to the world around. Round them then the companies couldn't sell us all their

[0:58:27] electronic crap. And if we could learn to be happy with you know, in in, you know, just kind of in the world. They wouldn't be able to sell us wrinkle cream, and you know shoes to make us sexy, and all of these things. Because you can see where uprooting us and moving us around and then making nature an alien thing, and making everybody have to be entertained by telephones and BlackBerrys and all of that other stuff. That that that that serves the the greedy ones. And so no wonder we're not encouraged to do these things. No wonder children are, you know, that we've evolved this kind of society where people move around. And, so I really was without saying what I just said, said in the book. I wanted to implicitly attack that. Also, I purposely don't write write very fast. And I don't try to get books out on purpose because when I was a little girl at Laguna Pueblo the old folks made things and worked on things and these were labors of love and for me the writing is done for love not for

[0:59:48] money. There's lots of ways to make way more money. All you have to do is be a banker and steal it from people. [Laughter.] All you have to do is be a politician and take bribes and payoffs from corporations. If I wanted money, I know how to get it. So I don't, I don't like the way that there's they've commodified the arts. But of course they have and so that was another thing that was, that was deliberate, you know without without saying so. And I didn't, I don't mention many human beings. Frankly, I decided that human beings get too much attention. [Laughter.] We humans think we're too, we're too important. We're oh so important, that somehow a human life is oh so much more valuable than the life of a rare rattlesnake. You know, don't ask me to choose. Don't ask me to choose. Don't ask me. It's not to say that they're more valuable. But of course, there are some human beings were rattlesnakes are much more valuable. But these are individual cases, but I purposely decided not to have very many people in there.

[1:01:01] And then, the other thing was for the narrow focus is what do I, what do I know? I barely know anything about myself. I know even less about other people. And, so I didn't really - I'm most comfortable with fiction. I call it the mask of fiction, but I thought for this that I would mostly try to fashion it into a self-portrait. And so I very consciously avoided mentioning very many people very many names as I said. I've just kind of fed up with human beings and I wanted to enjoy writing this book and to make it enjoyable, and I wanted my readers to know what I really love, and what I spent 10 years doing when I wasn't writing, you know. And actually you'll find out I did painting and through the paintings, I contacted or made contact with the star beings. I had a great time for 10 years and then, and then I had accumulated the material for this book. So I'm all for taking a very long time to do something. The old Navajo ladies used to take two or three years to weave a great big rug. And then later

[1:02:17] on, I remember my father one time saying - well if you average out the price that they got for the rug with the amount of time, they were only getting you know, 25 cents an hour. Yeah, but that wasn't really why they were doing it. So anyway, that was that. That's why it has this narrow kind of just my place, and stuff happening to me, partly because I'm not comfortable about trying to to I'm comfortable with fictional characters, but with living people, I'm not really comfortable trying to translate what they were thinking or what their motives are. And so that was another another reason. But most of all it was because I am most delighted by the bees and the hummingbirds and the little golden cockroaches and and the beautiful gold scorpions. You were mentioning the Godzilla lizard. There's a Mesquite lizard that got bigger and bigger and I called him Godzilla because he used to posture and make me back, you know, and I would pretend that I was frightened. And and, you know,

[1:03:24] I let him have his territory and I obeyed. I watched him and he and he got very confident. And so one day, he was very confident wasn't afraid of me at all - oh, she's you know, she's nothing. So one day early on, early in the morning I was out on my porch by the Mesquite tree and I moved one of my flower pots full of geraniums. And this most beautiful gold, she looked like she was made out of pure 24 karat gold, a little scorpion. And on her back, so beautiful, and perfectly, in perfect little curls were about 50 or 75 of her children and they were all on her back. All these little was so beautiful and I was looking at it - I was just. And at that moment Godzilla ran up, snatched her and ate her, swallowed her and her little children. And so that's Godzilla. And and so I was I was I was taken

aback, but of course there are these rules and it even in the in the in the in the in the in, among the little beings I like so much. That's what that's what Godzilla lizard,

[1:04:44] that's what he survived on. But, it was very shocking. And so I, so I have these moments and I also write about the day that there was the rattlesnake in the, in the out where I keep some of my macaws. And she was in there and she was, I thought I would go ahead and sort of shoe her out of there, because the Moluccan cockatoo don't like snakes. The Macaws are new world, and they're not afraid of rattlesnakes. And so I had this red plastic dust pan, and I sort of was kind of waving it at her to see if I could shoe her out, and it really angered her, and she started coming at me. So then I just went in the house. I was like, okay the you know, the patio is yours. It was one of the few times that the that that the any of the rattlesnakes showed that kind of spunk, but she did, she she put me in my place. So I also love that. I won't I won't tolerate there's so many things that I will I accept from from Godzilla lizard or from snakes that I would never tolerate from human beings, so that's the other thing. [Laughter from Sherman Alexie.] So, you know, anyway.

[1:05:58] **Sherman Alexie:** You know as you're, as you're telling these very autobiographical stories and as you're writing a memoir here - a memoir without people it's not quite true, but you know, it reminds me. I mean, it's really rare in the Native American literary world, to see a memoir something that is a nonfiction autobiography. I was trying to think about are you know, I was thinking about it. It's just not something we do.

[1:06:26] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** No, and there's probably a good reason for that. You know, you can have lots of people coming after you too. You know, I mean when you start writing about living living people, It is bad enough with fiction where everyone's thinking, oh, that's me, you know, and but then for sure. So, but also to I know I was trying to think about Scott Momaday's *The Names*, if that was that was kind of one of those. And and a little bit *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. But you're right, for the most part, we don't see, you know, we haven't seen that, but maybe we'll start seeing all sorts of memoirs, you know or not.

[1:07:09] **Sherman Alexie:** Well, I mean and Native American literature is some sort of in terms of public perception, it feels sort of static. I've been getting in trouble for talking about this, but you know, when I started when when I first was introduced to Native American literature by Alex, and then over the next few years. At that point, there were almost 30 Native American writers being published by major, you know small either independent university publishers or with you know, New York houses. I mean, there's almost 30 people being published in major ways, and now there's just a handful now. Xertainly some of that is because people have died, but I've been thinking about it, and the last Native American book to really launch a new writer into the world, was Susan Power with *The Grass Dancer* in 1995, Before that, it was me with *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*. So it's been 15 years since a new Native American writer really launched and and I don't know why that has happened. Do you have any ideas?

[1:08:15] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** I think it's a sort of overall malaise in this country. I don't just think it's among Native American writers. But I'm, I don't remember the last time I read. I read you -the book

that that that got you the award just recently. I read you, I read very few, you're one of the few contemporary authors. I read the Deborah Miranda's new book. And Janice Gould, the poet, is also. But I just think in general. I'm the the last course. I'm doing it, did this reading for Blue Sevens the novel that I'm working on. But I read HG Wells' War of the Worlds and Ursula Le Guin who I just love. I read her Lathe of Heaven because I wanted, because the star beings have come into the novel and since the star beings have come into Blue Sevens. I thought I better go look at the masters of science fiction, to see what, you know, to be reminded of what of how how it is that you can write really good literature, that oh by the way is science fiction because of course, there's a horrible prejudice in general against science fiction.

[1:09:31] Although I've never paid attention to any of these boundaries. And Blue Sevens, I don't know those star beings just insinuated themselves into it, but I have to tell you tis most amazing thing happened. After I got the idea that they were insinuating themselves into the novel and then I thought well, maybe they had told me if I painted their portraits, they would make sure that I finished this book. So I got started, and then I felt like, I felt like I had gotten out of contact with them because I hadn't been painting their portraits. And so I went and bought War of the Worlds and I wanted I wanted to I'd seen of course all the movies and stuff but I hadn't read it. Wow. What a good writer Wells is, especially in that book. And I had seen the Lathe of Heaven as a PBS show. What a wonderful novel. I had just started though War of the Worlds and I wasn't very far into it and on the night of June 23rd 2009. I woke up in my chair in front of the television, my favorite

[1:10:44] drug to numb the mind, and just sort of you know, just make you know, make you stupid and fall asleep. I woke up about ten after nine, and I had to let them, bring in my bringing two of the dogs. I have six Old English Mastiffs which were abandoned. I didn't, I'm not that crazy that I would acquire them. And so I went to let two of them inside and I've been thinking as I said about this contact with a you know, I felt like I wasn't, I had lost sort of lost a feeling of being somehow in contact with them. And so I went outside and I usually don't, I usually let the dogs in earlier and I went outside I let the dogs in but then I smelled the wonderful perfume of my datura plants, my wild daturas that were blooming and they bloom at night and it was so wonderful. And so instead of just going back inside and getting ready for bed, I lingered. And something made me look up and it was the most incredible thing I've ever seen this huge green fireball came out of the West and it came at about

[1:12:01] this angle and it was throwing these incredible big orange molten pieces were breaking off of it, and it was huge. It made your ordinary shooting star look like some little spark out of a fireplace. This thing was roaring through the sky and guess what? It looked like it was going to hit downtown Tucson, it was an optical illusion. It just kept going and going and I was watching it. I was like, oh my God, and you know when you see something like that you keep thinking. Well, it'll burn out now, it'll go out now, because if you've seen you if you've seen smaller shooting stars, but this was a bona fide green fireball. And I later found out that the Earth gets hit by about four every year, but in 2009 North America had three of them come. So it just kept going and going and going and then it looked like it hit downtown Tucson, but it didn't. Too bad. And so so it was just the most amazing thing I've ever seen. And then the next day, of course, if you Google June 23rd 2009 9:20 p.m.

[1:13:17] Tucson, it'll come up. I saw other people saw it. It was really amazing and the next day they found pieces of it, but I went I just felt like I was asking the star beings to you know, let me know that they were they were still with me, and that came through. Then I went back to War of the Worlds and of course in War of the Worlds, that's how the martians arrived as by the green fireball. And then in Lathe of Heaven, Lathe of Heaven is Ursula Leguin's omage to HG Well's War of the Worlds. And so those things came together that I would have those novels and be reading and then on that night this great fireball came it made me also happy and it let me know that that the star beings are going to help me finish Blue Sevens. So I had to I had to tell you guys that because it's the most, it was the most incredible thing I've ever seen in the natural world was that that giant green fireball that night. It was really great. Even if it didn't hit downtown Tucson. [Laughter from audience.]

[1:14:29] **Sherman Alexie:** I'm jealous. You know science fiction has always appealed to me because usually, I end up thinking that the people who are fleeing the evil are Indians. I mean science fiction is always in some form anti-colonial.

[1:14:40] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Absolutely.

[1:14:41] **Sherman Alexie:** And so something I've been obsessed with lately. I don't know if you saw it was the Battlestar Galactica remake?

[1:14:48] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** No, I didn't see it.

[1:14:48] **Sherman Alexie:** Oh! Oh, you need to rent it. Oh god. I've been staying up till 4:00 in the morning every night watching whole seasons of it. So you realized Battlestar Galactica is just a reservation, and...

[1:15:03] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Right, right.

[1:15:04] **Sherman Alexie:** And and and the cylons are Europeans. [Laughter from audience.]

[1:15:09] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Exactly.

[1:15:11] **Sherman Alexie:** And then they end up... yeah diseased.

[1:15:16] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Do we want to let the audience ask questions? Shall we let them? Shall we?

[1:15:22] **Sherman Alexie:** I love that two Indians ended up talking about HG Wells.

[1:15:26] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Yes. Yes.

[1:15:28] **Sherman Alexie:** So do you have any questions? They're going to ask you about the star beings. Because this is Seattle. They're going to get excited.

[1:15:35] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Okay. Well, I think the star beings won't mind if I tell the people in Seattle.

[1:16:01] **Sherman Alexie:** Okay. Okay.

[1:16:01] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Anyway if they ask.

[1:16:01] **Audience Member:** [Inaudible.]

[1:16:04] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Well... [More inaudible speech from audience member.] Oh - why do I think that we as a nation are cowering in front of these neo-nazis and these right-wing screamers?

[1:16:20] I think that we're still pretty much a racist country. I think I think some of the racism is from ignorance, not so much mean heartedness. And I think that, and also I think that people of conscience are always been polite and care about everyone's right to speak up. And these these crazed fascists really don't care and they're very scary, and they're very aggressive. And we're used to polite dialogue and they've sort of changed the rules. So to be fair, I think it's partly that, but I also think that there's there's, also we also in this country have a terrible ignorance of American history and world history. And I graduated from Highland High School in Albuquerque. I went to St. Vincent's Girls Academy though mostly. And but finally the nuns went crazy after Pope John changed the church. And so I finished school. [Laughter from audience.] They did! They leaped the wall. They left they got married. They had babies.

[1:17:37] And and the Highland High School. Yes, they were the first ones to, you know, liberate themselves. But at Highland High School it was a pretty good school, public high school. And we had really, I had George Form was our history teacher, and I had world history and American history. And then old. Mr. Perkins was the Southwest history teacher. So I had good history teachers. And yet... Mr. Form loved the Civil War, so we never got an American history. We never got past the Civil War. And I think this happened to a lot of people. But, Southwestern history though was pretty complete, Mr. Perkins did a good job. But because we don't have any idea of what happened when the Pinkertons came and smashed people, smashed the workers. Of the ugliness, the legacy of ugliness, that we have in this country towards suppressing populist movements, when people try to do something. And maybe it's partly that fear of being smashed. And then of course we have this whole thing of terrorism. And you know literally

[1:18:53] they can disappear you from the streets, and take you, and torture you, and waterboard you in this country. And there are already some of the, some of the narrative lines in television shows - where the police threaten a drug dealer by saying we'll call you a terrorist. And then, you know, you'll fall into the system. So I think that in our subconscious we're kind of a afraid. I think we're afraid in this country. Now we've seen what can be done to those who speak up, or stand up, and because because George Bush, and because there was eight years when when that was encouraged. And then when Obama got elected the racism, it just, it just caused those kinds of people the, the really

vicious mean ones, to jump up on their hind legs. And so I think a lot of us it's a little bit scary. It's a little bit scary. And so we have to you know, and and it's frightening and and then some people just don't know, and I include myself. I mean I've tried since I left high school, of course to try to make up the part

[1:20:10] that Mr. Form didn't teach us, but I think that's how I would answer that. That it's a it's a frightening time. And so I'm not, I mean, I think that, I think that people of conscience will begin to stand up and to find a find a voice, but it's very scary. For example in Tucson. They are so scared at the PBS TV station, the poor little thing. It's so poor that they can't even show Sesame Street on holidays or weekends. My parrot, my great parrot watches it she's very disappointed. She'll say - Elmo's coming! Elmo's coming! And I have to say - no, they're too poor to buy Elmo. You won't see Elmo today. But the PBS station usually they have a local guy who does book shows and always before, every time I had a book, he would invite me on his show. And this time they won't wouldn't invite me at all. And I think they're afraid that I might say something and then the Arizona legislators who are just looking for an excuse to cut more money away from the University of Arizona would do something. And the little

[1:21:25] Tucson Weekly the daily paper never reviews my work. I'm the devil incarnate because of Almanac of the Dead or the "red Indian" like in communist, which of course is a complete lie, because I'm an anarchist. [Laughter.] But but the little weekly paper recently changed hands and has gotten much more conservative and when Penguin, when they contacted them about doing, if they wanted to do an interview or something like that, they told Penguin they would do it later. So so there really are, in Arizona you really do, I mean, I don't care, I think it's funny. And my books sell just fine outside of Arizona, but just to let people know that that there are you know, there are real effects that are, you know, being seen from this - from the shift to the right. So so and I certainly noticed that this time it's like wow, you know. But people are scared. People like the public television, people are scared that more money will be cut, so they just decide that they don't need Silko up there rabble-rousing I guess. So anyway.

[1:22:47] **Sherman Alexie:** Yeah, they don't invite me on anymore either.

[1:22:50] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** Uh-huh.

[1:22:51] **Sherman Alexie:** But Seattle they do. But not in other communities.

[1:22:53] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** But not in other communities.

[1:22:55] **Sherman Alexie:** Seattle, but in Seattle here I think we're going to be losing our public access TV because of budget cuts.

[1:23:01] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** So here's somebody.

[1:23:15] **Audience Member:** [Inaudible.]

[1:23:15] **Leslie Marmon Silko:** You asking me or Sherman? I'm sorry. Me When I was in the fifth, when I was in the fifth grade, I had to leave the Bureau of Indian Affairs school at Laguna and we had to travel 50 miles one way, a hundred mile round trip every day to school. And I went into this 5th grade class, when I got there, I found out I was really far behind in math and in science. And I was crushed to learn what a crappy school the Bureau of Indian Affairs school had been. And I was feeling very alienated and very lost and then our fifth grade teacher Mrs. Cooper, she was from England, she was an immigrant, a war bride and she she was very kind. And one day though she told all of us kids in the class, take your spelling list and use each word at least one time in a story. And whereas before with I didn't even know there were times tables and you all of these other things I couldn't do, that day in class the other children in my class were having a really hard time, you know figuring out how to write a story that used

[1:24:32] each one of the spelling words, but for me, it was just a delight. And I could do it, and I finished like that. And suddenly it was something that I could do. And also while I was writing it I first experienced this sort of transformative state of mind or being where you're no longer in the room where you're writing, but you're where the story is. So I got hooked on that immediately, and I used to take the the chair and the back of the class so that when I finished my regular work, I could write. I started writing for myself because then I could, I wasn't in that room. I wasn't in that place. I was someplace else and so that's how I got started started writin. And then the other the other of course, the other thing was that in my family at Laguna Pueblo the women especial,y could see that you had to get an education - you had to be able to read and write in order to protect and maintain what little was left to us Indian people. That you had to really be a master of writing and books. And so everyone

[1:25:56] encouraged all of us kids to read, and we had books. And and and then the the other thing that also really gave me this idea of of of power, and the power of like the old stories, the remembered stories was that there was a lawsuit by the Pueblo against a state of New Mexico for two million acres of land that were stolen from us. And the testimony, part of the testimony, or the most important evidence were these stories and accounts by the old people about using the land, about possessing the land, you know to prove that it had been our land. So I was really fortunate early on to be very very much excited about writing, and of course reading to just getting lost in reading. And so that's that's how I got started and my eighth grade teacher, good old Sister Mary Agnes. She was so mean to us, but then years later, when she wrote to me as like she forgot all the time she would grab us by the elbow, and lift lift lift us up. And she she recalled that I used to, I used to do extra credit where I would

[1:27:13] I would do my writing and and and hand it in. So so that was that was how I got started and got the notion. It was the power of writing to transform, you know, my consciousness and and it was my refuge. Yes?

[1:27:33] **Chris Higashi :** I am really sorry because I could listen to you all night. But but I want you to buy books. I want you to be able to talk to Leslie and Sherman. And the garage really does kind of



close by 9:30 if I go down there and talk to him really nicely. So I'm going to call it, and at this point and invite you to come meet our two guests. Thank you so much.

[1:28:12] **Podcast Announcer:** 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.

