



Library podcast

2011 Seattle Reads Main Event with Chris Cleave, May 13

00:00:05 Chris Higashi

[Piano music] 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. To learn how you can help the library Foundation support The Seattle Public Library, go to foundation.spl.org. The podcast you're about to hear was recorded in 2011. [Piano music]

00:00:44 Chris Higashi

Good evening. I'm Chris Higashi, program manager of The Washington Center for the Book at The Seattle Public Library. Welcome to the central library. And thank you all so much for joining us for the 2011 Seattle Reads, "Little Bee," an evening with Chris Cleave. So I think you know that Seattle Reads is a project designed to deepen engagement in and appreciation of literature through reading and discussion, to foster reading and discussion of works by authors of diverse cultures and to create community around the shared reading of a book. So this is the 13th year of The Seattle Public Library's renowned one book, community reading program. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these things have been done around the country. And internationally. You may or may not know that we are the founders. We did the very first one, Nancy Pearl and I did. It's been enormously fun to watch what other communities do with the program to make it bigger and smaller and tie it to their communities. It's been fabulous. So let me start with a special thank you to The Seattle Public Library Foundation, which this year is celebrating its 30th Anniversary. The foundation represents thousands of people who make gifts large and small to support our libraries. It is that private support that makes possible Seattle Reads and so many of our free library programs. So to all of the foundation donors who are here with us tonight, we want to say thank you very, very much for your support. We're grateful to the Wallace Foundation for generous support for Seattle Reads since its inception. We thank The Seattle Times for promotional support for library programs this year. We also have support from KOUW public radio and from Simon & Schuster. And from our independent bookstore partners tonight, Elliot Bay Book Company. We also want to thank our community partners who have served generously as moderators and presenters for a whole series of programs this spring. The point of that programming is to put the book in context and help readers understand its themes. So through the series and numerous book discussions, I felt quite certain that we've met some of those. Some of the goals. There's some amazing programs that are available on Library podcast. Jorge Boron who is the director of the Northwest Immigrants' Rights Project showed us the world of asylum seekers locally in

our own region. He spoke about Little Bee as though she were a real person. And how would one do her asylum case? It was great. We had the local filmmaker, Sandy Coiffi. Her film is "Sweet Crude" about the consequences- the terrible consequences- environmental humanitarian, economic to the people of Nigeria's Niger Delta. That film, I think, she's just got distribution is what she told me, and it should be... start to be available for you to, you know, to get on Netflix or other things. We've also had two Nigerian-born writers of fiction writer and a poet that's available for podcast and finally, Book-it Repertory Theater. Oh my God, the most amazing staged readings of excerpts from "Little Bee," you know, they brought to life. Little Bee and Sarah and Lawrence and Evette. And oh, my. And they did a performance today with Chris Cleave present. He probably has something more to say about that. Okay, so Chris Cleave's debut novel "Incendiary," about a terrorist bomb in London, was published in Britain on July 7th 2005, the very day of the London train and subway bombings. It won numerous awards and critical acclaim. And then I think it went out of print and then came back. I mean, you can imagine that was real problem being released on that day. His second novel is titled "Little Bee" in Canada and the US, where it was a New York Times number one, bestseller has been on the bestseller lists of The Times, Publishers Weekly and many others. The novel is titled "The Other Hand" in the UK where it is a Sunday Times bestseller. So Chris Cleave has been a barman, a long-distance sailor, a teacher of marine navigation, a journalist, and he's toured in a rock band wearing dreadlocks. I really want to find that photo. So the format for tonight is Chris is going to give a talk, and then you'll be invited to ask questions. You're going to have to raise your hand and shout. He'll repeat them for the rest of you. And then before we break, I need to ask you to please take a few minutes to fill out the evaluation form. Your comments help us to see how we're doing at in our efforts to deepen engagement in literature. And your comments also help us to plan future library programs. So with that, please welcome Chris Cleave to The Seattle Public Library.

00:06:29 Chris Cleave

Thank you so much. Well, what a fabulous welcome. Thank you very much, Chris. And thank you to all of you. I can't believe this place. This Library. What I love most about it is that in a world of austerity, and in a world where everything's being cut back, this was built. This is amazing. And people were explaining to me that this not only is it a magnificent structure, but it was funded by the city voting in what was probably the largest Library bond in the history of the United States. And by extension, the and, by extension, the largest Library bond in the history of the world. We're making it as far as science knows, probably the most impressively publicly-funded library in the universe. There's nowhere I'd rather be standing. It's extraordinary. I was really impressed with this place. Chris gave me the, the guided tour when I arrived in town a couple of days ago, and we looked at the absolute magnificence of the structure, blows me away. It's huge. It's a temple to something that's really important to me. And I know. So everyone else in this room, which is the book and its widest form, you know, the book as something that should be accessible in a public space. Goodness knows how many tons of steel and aluminium and poured concrete and beautifully sculpted spaces go to make up this place. And then there's one focal point, a couple of floors up from where we are, where there's a magnificent screen. There are six high definition TV screens, one next to the other, where there's an art installation showing which book has just been checked out of the library. You can see this big scrolling banner and have this was the sort of this was the grand finale of our tour of the library. And I was thinking in this huge edifice, this beautifully funded thing constructed with the most

impeccable materials stocked with millions of books, busy with people at all times a day and night. I'm now going to go up to this art installation and see what was the first book that was checked out of the library here today. It's going to be War and Peace. It was actually the DVD of Shaolin Monks versus the Wu-Tang subtitle, Kung Fu extreme. Second book was born peace, but it's an extraordinarily impressive place looking at this place, and coming as I do from a tiny country that doesn't have anything like this kind of a public library system that doesn't have a building like this that doesn't have a public space like this. Anywhere in the country where I come from, doesn't have a forum like this. Were talking about literature is hugely impressive. During the second world war, someone came up to Winston Churchill, you know, one of the accounting guys that they have in the war and said, prime minister were running out of money in order to carry on Prosecuting the war. We're going to need to cut funding to the Arts to which Winston Churchill's reply was. So what are we fighting for when you see a place like this? Well, it reminds you, you know, this is what we're fighting for. We're fighting so that people can see Shaolin Monks versus the Wu-Tang, among other things. But I'm hugely grateful to be here. This is an incredible place. I would really like to thank the library foundation and all of the donors and the board of the library for making the city reads program possible. It's an incredible program. We've had so much fun over the last couple of days than the ton of events across the city. What I've been hugely impressed by is the sheer energy of Seattle, all right, or a lot. And I talk to lots of audiences. And let me tell you know, two cities are the same. We don't live in a homogeneous globalized culture. You really notice when a city has an energy and Seattle has an incredible energy. This is my third time in town feel that this is an amazing City to talk about books in the events that we've had, they've been full houses. People have be hugely engaged that the standard of the debate of the questions and answers has been really, really high. The engagement of readers is huge, but more than anything, the sense of humor in the rooms has been fantastic. And as a writer who believes that literature should be about having starting an interesting discussion amongst friends, rather than having the last word, that's the kind of atmosphere you want in a discussion about books. So I just like to say how grateful I am to be selected for this program. And to thank you very much for reading the book and being part of this extraordinary thing. It's a beautiful building, and it's a beautiful program. And I'd like to thank Chris higashi, especially for running an amazing City reads program that a lot of people tried to copy. But few people have managed to emulate. It really works. It's really fun, amazing building, amazing program, Amazing City. And as far as I can see, the only problem with the set up is that I'm standing here. It seems to be the missing piece of the jigsaw. I've always admired the American Writers I was brought up on Hemingway and Steinbeck. And more recently, I've been reading some extraordinary American writers like Cara Hoffman and Philip Meyer. I'm an Adam Haslett and these extraordinary writers who are really bringing alive current as and making them exciting, working in the kind of space I like to work in, and the space that after newspapers have left off, but before historians have started to pick up. This is the country that's really pioneering the kind of literature that I'm into at the moment. It makes me embarrassed to be the one that standing here. Because I guess for most of my life, I've been a terrible writer. I wrote a book when I was 16 that was my first novel. It was a book about a road trip fiction book, a road trip to Mexico, which was a country that I hadn't visited. Nor had I done any specialist research on, and it was a road trip I couldn't drive. The book was called the roadkill cookbook, and it had no merits at all. And nevertheless, I sent it off to all of the Publishers and London. And I remember being incensed when I got rejection letters for them. I remember thinking the world is not ready for my genius, not just by the rejection, but by the

tone of the rejection. I remember being very offended, and I stacked them all up in an envelope, which I still have just my big manila envelope of bitterness. And I keep it in the shed where I write. Two years later, I wrote my second novel. And I remember thinking this one wasn't just the best novel that had ever been written, but it was also one of the longest it was about 45 thousand words long. And for those of you, the audience who are writers, you all know that's exactly a third of a novel, really. But I remember being really impressed by the lengths of my book, and also by the exciting things that had to say about the way we live. Now it was also about Mexico. I was working on and off as a Barman at the time, and it was a book about a Barman in Mexico, wasn't the autobiographical at all yum. It was a book about a Barman in Mexico who invented cocktail recipes. And the book was called tequila Mockingbird. I know. And the title is the best bit. Just me. I wrote six or seven novels, right? All in our oh, I sent this one off as well, not just to all of the Publishers in London, but to all of the Publishers in New York as well, because I figured, you know, if London didn't get me, you know. And but I got a stack of rejection letters back from, from anyone who bothered to reply that time around as well. And I went into a period, I think, if they write the artistic history of my life, that will be called his great sulk. I did, but I decided the world wasn't deserving of any more work from me for a couple of years. But then I went straight back to it, and I wrote four or five more novels, and they were kind of funny. They were kind of ironic. They were kind of knowing they were very self-referential, and they were essentially all gloriously awful novels, because I didn't have anything to write about, you know. And as for the huge majority of my life, I guess I've been a terrible writer. And so will I stand here doing a city reads program in the city that invented City reads to an audience like you? I don't consider myself deserving in any way of the honor, but as Steinbeck said, I guess who I was brought up with. I'm very pleased to have it. And... I think I'd like to tell you about something that happened in my life that changed the kind of writer that I was in 2003 we had our first child, and he was great. He changed our world, and after the first six months of sleeplessness and realizing after about three months. So guess what this means. I never get a weekend off again. All of those typical realizations of young parents. I suddenly realized I sat down to write my ninth impossibly knowing and clever, use this novel and realized that I couldn't do it anymore. I realized that I'd changed the way I thought about the world hadn't changed it myself, but the fact of becoming a parent had done this for me. Now, I've spoken to a lot of other people for whom their life has been changed by a big event like that doesn't have to be having a child. I've met people who've been in serious car accidents, for example, or who have battled with a life-threatening illness. Whatever these big life events that suddenly put you outside yourself and make you see the world in a different way. The thing that did it for me was the birth of our child, which made me think about a bunch of things in a very different way before I'd been interested in human rights, intellectually. You know, I'd been interested in these theories of Justice. I'd been interested in geopolitics, but all of them in the when we had a kid, I suddenly began to think of these things in a much more concrete way, because you know what it's like when you have a kid, they start off being babies, and you do a lot of changing their diapers and washing them and making sure they can sleep okay, and making sure they're feeding or right. And then they get to be a little bit older. They get to be a year old, and they start to be mobile, and they're running around. And then you put security locks on the cupboards where they could get medicines and bleach and dangerous things. And you put little covers on the doors so they can't trap their little fingers in the door hinges. And you put little covers on the electrical sockets so that the children can't poke their inquisitive little fingers into the sockets and get a shock, and you'll safety firing their world, making

everything safe for them. And suddenly they grow up a little bit more, and you relax a bit, and you've covered the immediate dangers and you lift your eyes. To the Horizon and look out at the world old and think, oh, my goodness, it's incredibly dangerous. There's a whole world of objective dangers against which I need to protect my kid, not least of which the fact the world is desperately in just really cruel and inhumane. And most of it is covered in trouble. What can I do about it? You know, had this great moment at the age of 29 where I realized I was useless and couldn't do anything. I'm not. You know, I hadn't trained as a doctor, couldn't be a scientist, couldn't do any of these things to make the world safe of my kids. All I could do was write. And that's when I realized that I needed to write a different kind of novel where I cared about things like human rights and Justice in a more concrete way. And so when I came to write novels like that, it changed the way I wrote. I stopped writing about myself. I deliberately started to do all of these things that I do in my Action. Now deliberately to not be myself. I started writing from the female point of view. This was a big moment for me. I decided that every time I pick up my pen, I'm going to cross one boundary that makes me not be myself. So I'm going to cross a boundary of gender or of nationality or ethnicity, or of sexuality that one wouldn't normally cross to not be me to see the world with a different set of eyes. And to write about these things that I've begun to think were important. Why I thought little B was an important story to write was because of something that happened to me. When I was a student in 1992. I was working my way through University. One of the jobs that I was doing was working as a laborer. And the deal that we had with the agency that I work for is that you would assemble very early in the morning at A muster point, and they would put you into a small bus or a van and drive you to wherever you are going to work that day, and on one particular day, which was a very sunny morning with low missed hanging Fields. It's a beautiful morning. They drove us out in a bus way out into the Oxfordshire Countryside. And we drove through a perimeter fence, and this fence was chain-link topped with razor wire. And then we went through an inner perimeter fence. And the area between those two fences had been subdued with herbicide so that there were no bushes. There was no vegetation in which people could hide whilst escaping from this facility, and we drove through, and there were low grey buildings, and it was a prison, and they told us that it was a prison. And we were there to work in the kitchen, serving food to the prisoners, which is what we did. We were cooking very basic food like sausages and baked beans and mashed potatoes, and we were serving them to these bunch of people who turned out to come from all over the world. They were from early own and from Rwanda and from Botswana from Nigeria, from the Balkans. And after about a day of this, I was thinking, these people don't represent the general population of my country. This doesn't seem to be a normal prison. So you start making conversation. You know, these people were coming up in the serving line. And really, because I'm a terrible coward, I was asking them questions just to assess whatever my level love, personal safety was they we just been told they were prisoners. So I would ask them questions. Okay, see if you can think of a better conversational Gambit than this one I would in a prison ask people, what are you in here for? It seems really blunt doesn't. If I didn't know how else to start up conversations, and they would say, oh, we haven't done anything. And I'd be like, yeah, but really, they're like, no, no, really, haven't done anything. We are asylum seekers. I didn't know what an asylum seeker was. Okay? It turns out an asylum seeker is somebody who's a refugee. They're fleeing from somewhere where they are persecuted and where they're really scared that they will be killed if they stay, and they're going to a country where they think they will be safer. And they were they are asking for political asylum. And there are a certain number number of countries in the

world, including the United States and including the United Kingdom, who have signed a convention, a 1951 United Nations convention on refugees in which we say that we will give Safe Haven to people who claimed political Asylum. So these people are not committing a crime. And yet we were locking them up. I couldn't compute that, and I still can't know it's still a really gray area in the United Kingdom. If we should be legally allowed to look these people up, it turned out that the place I was working in was camps, fieldhouse, which was in Britain, the first detention center for Asylum Seekers that we ever built 10 years later, when I came to write little Be There Were Ten of them. And now, three years on from writing that will be there are 14 they're going up like mushrooms all over the British Countryside detention centers for people who have committed no crime. Now, these people are locked up with no release date after having gone through no legal process. And I wanted to write their story, because when I started getting to talk to them, I realized that they were some of the most interesting people I've ever met. And when I later on sought people out to interview them, to ask them about their experiences as refugees, I discovered that this hunch was kind of right. They are the most resilient, the most resourceful people that I've ever met. It struck me as completely wrong that they should be locked up in detention like that, and then deported back to their countries of origin, where a lot of them will face persecution. And I thought, if I could just find a way to tell the story of one person who had gone through that experience, that would be a way to tell the story of all of the people who come to our country and ask the very legitimate question, can you help the way I wanted to tell that story was using humor because a lot of the people that I met were quite funny using the story of one person, rather than using a lot of statistical information about politics, and to try to make real life real for readers. I don't know in this country if you have a terrible problem with reality format TV shows. This is mostly what we watch back home in the UK. Now, reality television. It's where you take people at both extremes of the bell curve of humanity, put them into some kind of closed system, and let them fight it out in some way or other until some person either wins, or there's no one left alive. It's reality TV. I'm sorry, but I'm not buying it. You know, that's not the reality I live in. It's not the reality I see when I interview people who have come from all over the world. I always feel that my job as a writer will be finished when people find real life as interesting as reality TV. I think that's the job of a novelist these days, certainly to take something that's really happening, but which has become on boring to us through overexposure in the news, and to make it interesting again and to tee up these interesting moral questions and ask them in a new way. That's all a novelist trying to do this, trying to ask a question of an intelligent reader. That's what I try to do. I try to ask these really simple things like, would you chop off your finger to save the life of someone you'd never met as the age-old question of Charity. Really, as the question that all of us are asked in our lives, I don't know whether I would. I have no idea, but I think it's interesting to ask the question, those of you who have read the book will know that there's a scene in it where Sarah and Andrew, who are a couple from the West, have gone on holiday to save their marriage. They've gone on holiday to Nigeria, which is actually an adventurous, but believable tourist destination for a young couple who are living in London. They could go to a be no beach in Nigeria, which is being marketed as a tourist destination, because it has beautiful golden beaches. Well, that turns out to be 3 or 4 days walk from an area of Nigeria that's extremely troubled and from which little bee and her sister a fleeing following an atrocity that happened in her Village and little be meet Sarah and Andrew on the beach, while all of these mercenaries who have been sent to chase down little being her sister and kill them because of what they've seen in their Village. They all arrive at the same time on the beach. And the leader of this

group of armed mercenaries asks a question of Sarah and of Andrew. He says, first of all, to Andrew, you know, will you chop off your finger to save one of these girls lives? He says he tries to do it. And then he says, no. Then Sarah picks up the machete and chops off her own finger to save the life of one of these girls. Those are the choices they make. I don't know what I would do when I was writing the book. I thought that Sarah had done the right thing. Okay. My way of looking at this situation was that faced with that moral dilemma, would you chop off your finger to save the life of this person? I thought Sarah had acted in a moral way, and Andrew had acted with cowardice, and that he should have done better. And in fact, later on them in the book, he stung with so much remorse that his life is not possible anymore. It can't carry on. And I thought I'd deed that moral question up quite nicely until I did a book Event in San Diego. And this is the amazing thing about book event site. They're all different. You get amazing audiences. You have very different takes on moral questions in San Diego. There's a big Naval base and three serving naval officers came to my event in uniform. This doesn't happen. Often I don't at a literary event. I mean, I get a lot of military personnel, but they very rarely come in uniform. And I was thinking, right, I'm in real trouble here. What have I done? And I am I going to be escorted from the room and what they say? I mean, they had been reading it in a book club on their boat, and they had been puzzling it out and working it through. And they'd been especially interested in this moral dilemma that set up on the beach. And they so we got to the question-and-answer. And they started telling me about what their view was of this scene on the beach. Now, it turns out that in the military, they do this thing called resistance training. Now if you're captured and you're Behind Enemy Lines, if you're taken prisoner, one of the things that will typically happen is that you will be put under stress. They might deprive you of sleep. They might deprive you of food. They might give you misinformation and tell you that this person is dead, or that person is dead. They will put you under extreme stress, and then they will try to get information from you. They will make menaces against you. They want might say something like, if you do not tell us what your unit mission was, then we will execute your buddy who we are holding in the Next Room. If you're in the military, it turns out that your job at that point is to say, fine, do it right, because you don't know what your captors? No? All right? You don't know whether they're telling you the truth or not, you don't know how important the information is that you might divulge. Your job is to assume that if that person is in a position where they could be killed, they're already dead. That's resistance training. Your job is to say, fine, go ahead, do it. But I'm not going to give you what you need. They are trained to do that. They're put under stress, they're deprived of sleep. They have to make these very difficult decisions in very realistic situations where they believe it's really happening to them. That's resistance training. And they were saying, look, look at this scene on the beach. Andrew is the only man in the room who's thinking you, you're taking him onto this beach. You're putting him in a situation where he's effectively held captive by a guy who's certifiably crazy. You've no idea what this guy is going to do. You know, all you can guarantee when you cut your finger off, is that you're going to have the same situation, and you're going to have to deal with it with one less finger, and they were completely right. And this, I think, is what, what I mean when I say, like a, as a writer, you want to have the first word in a conversation, but not the last word. You want to take an interesting moral dilemma like, would you cut off your finger to save the life of someone you've never met? You can make that question, so interesting that people start thinking about the question, but you can't answer it because no one has the right answer to that. And it turned out I had a different answer to the answer that these guys had. And actually, I think their answer is better. But I think it's better because what they're

saying is, look, there's no Universal moral answer to that question. You have to look at the situation because context is everything. And in that context, actually, the conclusion that you come to, if you've been through resistance training, is probably the right conclusion. And it was very different from my conclusion, sitting at my comfortable desk and my uncomfortable shed in London, where I right? I thought that was really interesting. And it was kind of an exercise in humility for me as well, because you realize that quite often, a lot of the things you think are wrong. That's, you know, part of my journey of being a writer. In fact, every book event that you do it's very different, and you learn something from it. I was in Minnesota. Four days ago. We were doing an event in a little town called Cambridge and Minnesota. And there was an auditorium smaller than this one, but it was nice and full. And we were in a really good discussion. And people were asking me questions about the Queen of England, actually, because I wasn't from around those parts. And people were curious. There's just been a royal wedding. I was giving background information on the minor Royals. And these Sirens went off these huge earth-shaking sirens. And I was terrified because I gripping onto the podium. I didn't know what was happening. And all of these minnesotans were sitting there, just gasps. I aren't you guys being very cool about this. I was very impressed by their Courage. The facilitator came up to the podium and said, look, we're going to have to stop for a minute. There's some Sirens going on. We don't really know what it's about, but we're all just as a precaution going to go down to the basement now. So I was thinking, okay, we're, and they filed in an orderly fashion down to the basement. And we carried on the event down there. Now, the bait that the auditorium had been packed. And the basement, I'd say it was about thirty percent of the volume of the auditorium. So we were all standing like this, and carrying on the Q&A that we were doing. I saw you. Americans are so gave this clip. We're clearly going to be bombed from above. And you guys still think it's important to do a book event. I found it very moving. And I thought, you know, if in the unlikely event that any of us survive? No, all right about this one day. Okay, it turned out it was a tornado warning, right? And they were also used to it that no one had felt the need to explain to me what it was just assumed that I would know. That it was a tornado warning, and the chances of us actually being taken by the tornado were quite small because These Warnings sounded all the time, but I was absolutely terrified, and it puts a completely different complexion on these abstract moral questions that you're trying to ask when you're talking about them with 200 minnesotans. It in the basement like this context is everything right when, when you're discussing moral questions, context is everything and all, all I like to try to do is to phrase that question in an interesting way. I have a rule as a writer, which is the Only Rule I have actually Somerset more want. One of my favorite writers W Somerset maughan, said, very authoritatively. And there are three rules rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are. I have I have one, which is the each page should make you want to read the next page, right? I am pretty simple. There's a writer who I really admire. I think he's actually the best writer is a fabulous, Charming, irresistibly good writer. And I think he's wrong about everything. All right, I can't stand. His politics is PJ O'Rourke, right? He's one of my favorite writers. I've got dying respect for him, and he's fantastic. He has this phrase that he uses an acronym that he uses, which is Meg omega0 that stands for my eyes glaze over. And he says, by the second paragraph of most newspaper articles about the world, it's just meh. Go, you know, my eyes glaze over the politics of immigration has become like that, right? You read a newspaper, a paper article, and it's like, oh, it's this story again at the biggest stories on Earth. Actually, if you take issues like HIV or malaria or climate change, or the problems of pollution linked to oil exploitation, or the refugee crisis, or the

global economic slowdown, it's our may go by paragraph 2 as you already lost. And that the job of fiction is, is to not lose you in paragraph to the jumper to make is to tee up these hopefully compelling moral questions to the point where you're still interested in them by the end of the book. And the only question that I'm asking in Little B is how much of one's comfortable life should one give up for the sake of someone who has a less comfortable life. So the old question of Charity I've asked, and some very violent ways, like, would you cut off a finger to save the life of someone that you've never met yet? But I'm asking it in some subtler ways as well. Like, would you resign from your perfectly good job? Because you didn't believe it was taking you in a direction where you could help someone who needed help, right? That's actually a question that life is much more likely to ask us unless Sirens go off. And it's another Minnesota situation is unlikely that people are going to run into this room now and ask me if I'm going to chop off a finger or not, but it is likely for all of us in the room that we might decide. We're going in a slightly wrong direction in our career, and we could maybe go in a Direction Where We volunteer more and work less. Don't know. That's another question that's asked in the book. A question that's asked right at the end of the book is, is Sarah going to do something radical at the end of the book to save little beat weekend? We don't know the book ends. I think perfectly Ambiguously. You know, a lot of people, a lot of people get really angry about that. I said, there's some someone posted on my website this morning. I'm not making this up. You can check it out. She said, if I was finishing the book and you were in the room, I would pick up the book and smash you on the head with it. And I would ask you, what the hell you thought you were doing? That's what she said. So I wrote back. And I asked, how hard would you hit me? As I was interested to see if I would retain consciousness long enough to answer her follow-up question, you know, what the hell did I think I was doing, and she hasn't got back to me, but I'll let you know, but I understand why it makes people angry. But here's what the hell I thought I was doing. I think that the job of a writer is not to provide answers, because goodness knows we have no special wisdom, but it is to make life interesting again. It's like it's to try to make real life more interesting than reality TV. That's the job. And I think one of the problems with giving closure to a book is by definition, you have to give an answer. You know, you say, well, if little be lives at the end of the book of little be survives, that means that whatever help Lawrence and Andrew and Sarah collectively gave to her was sufficient. If Little Bee dies at the end of the book. Well, that means that whatever help these Western characters collectively gave to her was insufficient. The book provides an answer. I didn't want to provide an answer. I just want to ask the question in an interesting way, that means I can't. I can't say what happens on the beach at the end of the book, I guess, unless you hit me really hard with the book, in which case my cowardice would take over. And I tell you what I think would happen, I found that concept quite hard to explain. No, it's a long explanation for why I don't provide any closure at the end of the book. The and I struggled with it. I was I sometimes explain to people how hard I think it is to finish a novel compared to how easy it is to start. One. Human stories don't neatly end. That's one of the reasons I really like people. People just carry on with each other. And I always brought up in the tradition of English novels of the 18th and 19th century, where every novel finishes with the the hero or heroine getting married, and they live happily ever after in one of my novels that's more likely to be the start of the problems. It's hard these days to have to get closure into a human story. So I was floundering in these Waters. I was trying to explain to people why I don't finish the book with closure. I was using the excuse that, you know, closure doesn't exist in our modern world, which people wouldn't buy. And I used the excuse that joke. I'm asking the question, I'm not answering it, which

people don't buy it. And I was really struggling with that. And then again, in Phoenix, Arizona, an audience member, just stuck her hand up and said, yeah, what you're basically saying is the book leaves you with a stone in your shoe as I yep. Thank you. That's that's the effect I was trying for. You know, like, like most things, you know that someone in the audience will say something pretty smart. And then you spend the rest of your life pretending it was your idea. That's the book leaves you with a stone in your shoe. And that's what I wanted to do with that. I hope I've, I hope I've tried to convey a little bit about why I wrote the book and about, you know, why I write and the questions that I've set up, and in this book in particular, and Little Bee but so I hope I've managed to convey a sense of the excitement that I feel about being on tour in this country, particularly talking about it. I do book events all over the world now, and you really notice the difference in different countries in my country, in the United Kingdom. It's hard to get a reaction you asked in the questions and answers. Does anyone have any questions? No, no, no. Does does anything? Is anyone have anything they'd like to to comment on? No, no, no. Other countries as well. France? It's impossible to get a reaction. You come to America. Sometimes people don't let you finish your talk. It's brilliant. It's such an instinctively democratic place to be is is wonderful. You know, American audiences are incredible. And and touring around here, I've gained a much deeper insight into why I want to be a writer, you know, because I really believe in that link between reader and writer. I really believe in the creative process that is right. That is, reading every single one of you who's read the book would have read a completely different novel, actually, you know, from the one that the rest of you have read, or from the one that I think I've written. It turns out that three naval Personnel in San Diego could have actually worked out the right answer to something that I thought I had the right answer to. It turns out that a lady in Phoenix, Arizona can actually work out how to express the concept I was shooting for at the end of the book. It's a collective effort. Touring this country has made me realize that. And I wanted to, I hope, sort of convey some of the excitement that I feel about talking about books in America, which I can state it is the most living, an exciting and dynamic culture that I've ever experienced. It's an amazing thing. So I just wanted to kind of thank you all for that. We can go straight to we can go straight to Q&A, or I could do a reading. This is the kind of thing you know in England. I would have to say what was going to happen. But it being a democracy I can, I can say, can we have a show of hands? I mean, if if you'd, if we can go straight to a question and answer, we should be super happy to do, or I could do a short reading first, if you like a short reading first, please raise your hand. Motion is carried? [Laughter] It's easy. If I tried to do that in France, everyone would be like "what?" Yeah, they'd be like, well, that would work in practice, but would it work in theory? It, it split into 14 different committees and 12 years later later, you know? So we're going to have a reading. Okay, I've started this. Those of you have read the book. There's a quotation at the beginning of it, and I've taken this quotation verbatim from a Charming pamphlet of about 85 pages, that Britain producers for Asylum Seekers. And in fact, for immigrants in general who seek to become British, you can do this thing called a British citizen shit test. And that involves committing to memory the contents of this pamphlet, which is called life in the United Kingdom, a journey to citizenship and is an amazing document. It has a sort of potted history of Britain, which, you know, willfully emit huge details that just historically inconvenient. It doesn't mention the Crusades, for example. So, no, no, no, that was us. It's very big on Winston Churchill, but it misquotes him terribly. I know really, you know, it glorifies Britain. It also has some very pragmatic advice. Actually, there's this as this part of it, a session on British manners and Customs, which is, it runs to 10 pages one of it. It has a whole page on Pub etiquette, which is

spot-on in our do spend. You know, that's our Common Ground. We don't have beautiful libraries. We have good pubs. We spend a lot of time in pubs. The government's advice to people who are Asylum Seekers who have fled from persecution who have walked out of War zones on their bare feet is if, if one spills are strangers drink in a pub, it is customary to offer to buy them. A new one seems like very good advice. It's kind of a weird document. You have to commit the whole thing to memory. And then you can pass a British citizenship test, which I tried and failed. It turns out I'm not one of us. This is a this is a quotation from that's buried about a third of the way in under the title. Our values. It says, Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven, even for people fleeing persecution and conflict. They mean fleeing, right? They mean fleeing. And I took that from the fifth edition of this book now. And that reading that in the research was the thing that got me angry enough to decide. I needed to damn well write the book, right? Because that really sucks. You know, he's okay. Let's look at the transaction that's involved here, but an asylum Seeker right there, villages burned down their fountains. I'm I shouldn't laugh. I'm saying this. Their Villages burned down. Their family is murdered, right? They believe that if they stay there, they will be murdered too. So they walk out of this war zone on their feet, right? I've met people. I've talked with people and look them in the eye, who have walked from Nigeria to Cairo, right? I mean, that involves jungles, mountains and desert, right? A lot of desert, actually. And then they have lived in Cairo for two or three years, getting the money together to pay a people Smuggler, to take them in a boat from North Africa to southern Europe. And having had the determination and the strength to get to Cairo the tenacity to work in terrible menial jobs, to get the money together to pay the people Smuggler, you had better be a fabulous judge of character, because if you choose the wrong people Smuggler, well, they'll just throw overboard. You know, it's a lot cheaper to fill your boat up with refugees to drive five miles offshore and to throw everyone into the water than it is to actually take them across the Mediterranean to Southern Italy. Everyday bodies wash up and large numbers on the shores of North Africa and southern Europe. So you'd better have chosen a good people Smuggler. This person I met had then walked from Salerno in southern Italy to Calais and walked across Europe. And then by a mechanism that I still don't know had arrived in the United Kingdom, presumably involving more resourceful nurse and sub diffusion. That is an incredible journey for someone to make. Right. That's how badly that person wanted to be helped by us wanted to become eventually a citizen in our Western democracies. That's the effort they were prepared to put in. The effort we were prepared to put in was to write a sentence like we will provide a safe haven for people fleeing persecution and conflict, right? They could do all that, but we couldn't even be bothered to copy edit the document that we forced them to memorize. It drove me nuts thinking about that, that relationship between A persecuted individual and an uncaring bureaucracy. No for do one thing with this book. I want them to correct that typo. Most days I wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl, everyone would be pleased to see me coming. Maybe I would visit with you for the weekend. And then suddenly, because I'm fickle like that, I would visit with the man from The Corner Shop instead. But you would not be sad, because you would be eating a cinnamon bun or drinking a cold Coca-Cola from the can. And you would never think of me again. We would be happy like lovers who met on holiday and forgot each other's names. A pound coin can go wherever it thinks it will be safest. It can cross deserts and oceans and leave the sound of gunfire and the bitter smell of burning fat behind when it feels warm and secure, it will turn around and smile at you. The way my big sister ink Erica used to smile at the men in our village in the short summer, after she was a girl, but before she was

really a woman, and certainly before the evening that my mother took her to a quiet place for a serious talk. Of course, a pound coin can be serious, too. It can disguise itself as power or property. And there's nothing more serious. When you are a girl who has neither, you must try to catch the pound and trap it in your pocket so that it cannot reach a safe country unless it takes you with it. But a pound has all the tricks of a sorcerer when pursued. I have seen it shed its tail like a lizard so that you are left holding only Pence. I'm when you finally go to seize it. The British pound can perform the greatest magic of all. And this is to transform itself into not one but two identical green American dollar bills. Your fingers will close on empty air. I'm telling you how I would love to be a British pound. A pound is free to travel to safety, and we are free to watch it go. This is the human Triumph. This is called globalization. A girl like me gets stopped at immigration, but a pound can leap the turnstiles and Dodge the tackles of those big men with their uniform caps and jump straight into a waiting Airport Taxi, "Where to, Sir?" "Hmm, Western Civilization, my good man, and make it snappy." See how nicely a British pound coin talks. It speaks with the voice of Queen Elizabeth. The second of England. Her face is stamped upon it. And sometimes when I look very closely, I can see her lips moving. I hold her up to my ear. What is she saying? Put me down this minute young lady, or I shall call my guards. But if the queen spoke to you in such a voice, do you suppose it would be possible to disobey? I have read that the people around her even Kings and prime ministers they find their bodies responding to her orders before their brains can even think, why not? And let me tell you, it's not the crown and the scepter that have this affect me. I could pin a tiara on my short fuzzy hair, and I could hold up a Sceptre in one hand like this. And police officers would still walk up to me, and they're big shoes, and they would say, love The Ensemble, Madam. But let's have a quick look at your ID. Shall we? No, it's not the Queen's crown and scepter that ruling your land. It is her grandma and her voice. That's why it is desirable to speak the way she does that way. You can say two police officers in a voice as clear as the cullinan diamond. My goodness, how dare you. I'm only alive at all because I learned the queen's English. And maybe you're thinking that isn't so hard. After all, English is the official language of my country, Nigeria, yes. But the trouble is that back home, we speak at so much better than you to talk the queen's English. I had to forget all the best tricks of my mother tongue. For example, the queen could never say there was plenty wahala that girl done use her bottom power to engage my number one son, and anyone could see she would end in the bad bush. Instead, the queen must say, my late daughter in law used her feminine charms to become engaged to my are, and one might have foreseen that it wouldn't end. Well, it's all a little sad. Don't you think? Learning the queen's English is like scrubbing off the bright red varnish from your toenails. The morning after a dance, it takes a long time, and there's always a little bit left at the end, a stain of red along the growing edges to remind you of the good time you had. So you can see the learning came slowly to me. On the other hand, I had plenty of time. I learned your language in an immigration Detention Center in Essex in the Southeastern part of the United Kingdom. Two years, they locked me up in there. And time was all I had. But why did I go to all the trouble? Well, as because of what some of the older girls explain to me to survive? You must look good or talk, even better, the plain ones and The Silent Ones. It seems their paperwork is never in order. You say they get repatriated, we say, sent home early, like your country is a children's party, something to wonderful to last forever. But the pretty ones and the talkative ones, we're allowed to stay in this way. Your country becomes lively and more beautiful. Thanks very much indeed. Thanks for being such a great audience.

01:01:01 Chris Higashi

[Piano music] 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. [Piano music]