



Library podcast

2012 Seattle Reads Amy Waldman, May 5

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[00:00:40] I'm Chris Higashi the Program Manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. Welcome to the 2012 Seattle Reads The Submission by Amy Waldman. We thank the Ballard Branch for hosting us today. Special thank you to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. We also thank the Wallace Foundation for generous support. We also have support this year from Picador Books Amy's publisher and Talia Sherer, the library marketing person for the MacMillan Group. We thank also our media sponsors KUOW Public Radio and the Seattle Times and of course our independent bookstore partners. Today University Bookstore is here with Amy's novel for sale. Okay. It is my great pleasure to welcome Amy Waldman to Seattle. [applause]

[00:01:35] So thank you all for coming today. It's really a pleasure to be here. I want to thank first of all Chris for organizing not just my trip but such thoughtful programming around the book as well. And I want to thank the Seattle Public Library and all its branches and and the Foundation as well as the Seattle Public Library Foundation for making this possible. I've been telling people that as a first-time author, it's very hard to imagine anybody not related to you actually reading your book [laughter] when you're sitting by yourself for several years working on it and you certainly don't imagine a city taking it up. I would be thrilled for any town or city to choose this for a program. But Seattle in particular such an honor given the history of this program, the lineage of writers they've had come for Seattle Reads and it's just such a literary city. You know, I live in New York and I've seen way more bookstores here in a much smaller city than you see sadly in New York. So it's really great to be

[00:02:34] here. I originally thought oh, you know city reading your book it's sort of just like a giant book club, but I was corrected and talking to a librarian actually about this and she said it's different because a book club you often gather with people who are very much like you but when it's town or city is discussing a book part of the point is to bring very different people together for public conversations around a book. So it's great to be part of that. In case you haven't read The Submission yet, very briefly, it tells the story of a an anonymous competition to select a memorial for 9/11. I never directly call it September 11th in the book, so a 9/11 like event. But the jury meets and

chooses a design called the garden and then opens the envelope to learn the winner's name and learns that it's a Muslim American architect named Mohammad Khan and they very quickly know this is going to pose some difficulties given this takes place about two years after the attacks given where the country is. To complicate

[00:03:33] matters the garden itself is ostensibly benign, beautiful garden, but once the identity of the designer is revealed questions are raised about whether it in fact is an Islamic garden with which it shares elements in common. So that's sort of another layer of the controversy. So I mostly want to spend the time here answering your questions. I'm just going to do a very brief reading. So Mohammad Khan the architect who wins the competition, this takes place before he enters. He is born and raised in Virginia. He was raised secular. He goes by Mo not Muhammad. But after these attacks, he's in Los Angeles. He's trying to return to New York and he's pulled aside for an interrogation at the airport. So the short section I'm going to read takes place at the end of this questioning. "The interview ended as capriciously as it had begun. Without explanation they asked to photograph and fingerprint him. Instead of refusing as he believed was his right, he allowed them to press down his fingers as if he were

[00:04:31] a paralytic. An acquiescence that marked off the man who left the room from the one who had entered. At the agents physical touch, the hand lifting his, there was a brief flare of fury, an impulse toward violence. Then the almost instantaneous checking of it. Returning home he found that they had pillaged his suitcase, crumpled his precisely folded shirts, unpaired his socks and capped his shampoo and toothpaste so that a nebulous ooze coated his toiletries. He upended the suitcase on the bed, dumped the toiletry kit in the trash, kicked the wastebasket to the wall. But his bitterness was overwhelmed by the magnitude of mourning around him. The city reeled-the air ashy, the people ashen. The attack site a suppurating wound you felt even when you didn't see it. One night, soon after his return, Mo walked toward the zone of destruction. The moonlight picked out a strange fine dust clinging to leaves and branches and his toe rested on a paper scrap with charred edges. The eternal lights were off in

[00:05:31] the nearby office towers, as if the city's animal appetites had been quelled. A quilt of the missing, bright portraits of tuxedoed men and lipsticked women, had been pasted on fences and construction plywood, but the streets were empty. And for the first time in memory, he heard his own footsteps in New York City. He imagined, couldn't avoid it, the shaking hands that must have placed each of these photos on a photocopy machine, that roll of blue light, cold, mechanical hope. False hope. The centers of hundreds upon hundreds of webs of family, friends, work had been torn out. It staggered Mo, shamed him. These men who had given vent to their homicidal sanctimony had nothing to do with him yet weren't entirely apart. They represented Islam no more than his own extended family did, but could he say they represented it less? He didn't know enough about his own religion to say. He was the middle class Muslim son of an engineer, a profile not all that different from the terrorists. Raised in another society, raised religious,

[00:06:30] could he have become one of them? The question shuddered through him and left an uneasy residue. Behind a police sawhorse an Indian man in a bedraggled white shirt and black

bowtie held a sign: we are open. The man motion to a tiny restaurant down the block and although Mo wasn't hungry, he followed and ordered a sympathy cholo. The waiter left him to the cook, who also served, and alone, Mo picked at his chickpeas and naan. Here he could hear himself chew. What was it he was trying to see? He had been indifferent to the buildings when they stood, preferring more fluid forms to their stark brutality, they're self-conscious monumentalism. But he had never felt violent toward them, as he sometimes had for that awful Verizon building on Pearl Street. Now he wanted to fix their image, their worth, their place. They were living rebukes to nostalgia, these Goliaths that had crushed small businesses, vibrant streetscapes, generational continuities, and other romantic notions beneath their giant feet. Yet

[00:07:23] it was nostalgia he felt for them. A skyline was a collaboration, if an inadvertent one, between generations, seeming no less natural than a mountain range that had shuddered up from the earth. This new gap in space reversed time." Thank you. So now I will open it to questions. Yes, so I'm going to repeat the questions. Yep. The question was about I spent time in Afghanistan and how difficult was it to really understand the culture and penetrated as an outsider. I think as a reporter one of the things you have to learn, which I'm not sure all reporters do, is that you will never fully understand another culture and frankly I'm not sure I fully understand America either. But you know, I went into Afghanistan I didn't know I would be going there when I first went and knew nothing literally about the country and didn't have, because it was when the war was still going on in the fall of 2001, didn't have access to a computer. You know, I couldn't get on the internet and look up a lot of information.

[00:08:22] So initially, I was really in some kind of very pure way just going blindly going on what I saw and heard. I had a great translator then and on all my subsequent trips to Afghanistan and that helped a lot and my first translator was from Iran but the later translators I worked with were from Afghanistan and I feel so much of what I learned about the country was through them. Not just translating what people said, but they explained the culture to me but more than even explaining it it was just in watching them, their relationships with their families, how they lived, how they practiced Islam, you know, all of these things just partly by observing them, partly by listening to them. I do not understand everything at all. But I you know feel I got a decent sense of how people live, how war has affected them because they had been through 30 years of war essentially. In a weird way people always want to know if being a woman was a handicap there, but I found it an advantage because men they looked at me

[00:09:25] as some sort of that kind of I wasn't a man, I wasn't a woman, I was an American woman just doing what American women do, so it wasn't that they would talk to commanders, they were very open with me cause they didn't look at me like their wives, I was just a different breed and as a woman you can talk to women and most male reporters could not do that. And so I felt incredibly lucky to have that access and I often found that the women told the truth much more than the men [laughter] The men I think because they've been fighting and that, you know, they are the ones kind of who have dealt with these successive wars and ways are rulers and so on they've adapting often involves sort of playing both sides and not being entirely forthright. Where as the women, I would always go to them to find out what really what's going on. They were just much more honest often. So

but I felt very lucky to have that way in with women. So she she asked in my words why I wrote the book. I think it's sort of the primal question for a

[00:10:23] writer in a way. I think, you know, the idea literally came to me during a conversation with a friend sort of talking about this September 11th Memorial Competition and Maya Lin and it sort of just popped into my head and stayed there. But I think it just intersected with so many things I had been consumed with after September 11th, but I think things I had even thought about before September 11th, about what does it mean to be an American? Who gets to be fully American? How do we respond to times of threat? And I had also become very interested in Islam because I was spending so much time in reporting, in not just Afghanistan, but multiple Muslim countries and communities and so on. And so sort of trying to look at how both this country and this faith were, I felt almost undergoing these identity crises about what would they be in the wake of this attack? I thought a lot about that. It came up in my reporting all the time. I suddenly just started, you know, there was no non-fiction book I

[00:11:22] felt I could write about that that would get at, because I had more questions than answers and I feel like fiction is a much more suitable medium for questions in a lot of ways than nonfiction is. I also just became fascinated by this story of what would happen? How would we as a country respond? And who was Muhammad Khan and trying to figure all that out. And I have a lot of friends now who've written books and I always look at them and think nobody else could have written the book that you wrote, just because of their history and background and their passions and obsessions and it does kind of have to be an obsession. And so I felt that way about this book of just this is the one for me and when I started writing it wasn't thinking about publishing or an audience or anything. It was just such a personal passion, you know for six months I didn't tell anybody that I was even working on it because it was just something I wanted to try and explore. So the question was about Claire Burwell,

[00:12:16] who is the sole family member who sits on the jury. She's a widow who's lost her husband. She is very privileged in background or through her marriage actually and I really like the way you put it how she's both protagonist and antagonist in a lot of ways. Initially I thought there's Mohammed Khan, the architect who wins this, who else is arrayed around him and I knew I wanted to tell the story from multiple points of view. So I said, you know, I looked actually at the actual 911 memorial competition where there's one family member on the jury and I thought okay, so there will be a woman. So who is she? You know, I read a few memoirs of widows who had lost their husbands in September 11th, and I was thinking initially I was really interested in the question of the almost political legacy of a marriage and what happens when events change your perception of the world. So I had read there were four widows in New Jersey that they became known as The Jersey Girls who became very politically active. They really

[00:13:14] pushed for the 9/11 commission after September 11th. And one of them talked in her memoir about how she and her husband had been really staunch Republicans and yet because of September 11th, because of the way she perceived the government's response and her anger at not being able to get answers from President Bush and others, that she politically completely changed.

And so that was one thing that factored into thinking about Claire of who are you because of who you think your husband was and trying to honor his memory and yet you're living in a different world. And so what does that do to you? And what is the tension between those things? So that was part of it. And then in terms of her privilege, I think I was just interested in questions of power and so much of the novel is with these different characters, kind of structured as oppositions between them. So insiders and outsiders and who was in the place to be making decisions. So that was part of it. It's just the contrast. Initially actually part of it

[00:14:13] was the character of Sean Gallagher who was the brother who of the firefighter who died on in these attacks. Initially he was a woman who was also on the jury, but class-wise very different from Claire. Initially I was thinking I always wanted class to be part of the novel because I feel in so many political fights and discussions and controversies it's sort of the elephant in the room. It's enormously important, but it doesn't get talked about or acknowledged often. You know, what is the the sort of class difference between these two women and how does that factor into how they respond to. And I felt even in looking at some of the family members, the actual family members after September 11th there was an enormous variation in class and that often affected how they approached the memorial and many of the other contentious issues that came up. I just felt that that was part of her story. That's part of how I thought about Claire and then more and more she just came to seem like a woman really

[00:15:13] trying to find herself through this process and sort of the instability of her foundation deep inside became central to the story in a lot of ways. And yet I was just rambling on, but I was also interested, there's another widow, for those of you who haven't read it, in the story who is from Bangladesh, she's an illegal immigrant. Initially I was thinking, okay she and Claire are completely opposite. Asma's in the shadows, she has no power, she has no money and yet over time, and this happened a lot as I worked on the novel, I became very interested in the parallels between them. These two women sort of trying to define themselves after the marriages that essentially defined them have ended. So it was interesting to suddenly see them as very similar despite the extremely different external circumstances. Oh yeah so, so initially this Sean, initially Sean was Lucy, this widow who was also on the jury. The problem was she was just flat as a character and I learned over time, you know, you sort of, especially

[00:16:11] coming from a journalistic background where you kind of plan out everything, you know, I had started out saying alright well, this is going to be this character Lucy and she's going to stand for x y&z and I realized fiction doesn't work well if you try to do that and she just never came alive. And so one day I was getting on the subway in New York and I thought Lucy's meant to be a man and it just came out of nowhere and I started thinking about her as a man named, eventually became named Sean, and I also took him off the jury because I thought it was more interesting to have that tension of you know, that he feels excluded in that sense. And again, these questions of who has power, who gets to make decisions, and he just worked, she, he, worked much better as a man. You know different scenes I worked on he would plan the beginning of the scene and by the end he would have done something I was not expecting and it really, I thought that's who he is. He does things and then has to deal with

[00:17:06] the consequences and Lucy fell on, you know, the cutting room floor [laughter]. But I think the novel was actually much stronger as a result. Yes. So I'll repeat the question which was why given the multiple perspectives in the novel is there not a more explicitly Jewish Outlook or presence? And I think, I thought a lot about it and I felt I mean, Paul is Jewish, he's a sort of in a small way comes, figures in some of his outlook and his wife, certainly. I think I just felt probably I am Jewish as a novelist it was more interesting to me to take some of my own experience but embed it in characters who were not like me. And so it was funny, somebody who knows me and read the book said "Oh, Mo is just a male, Muslim you." [Laughter] I thought, you're kind of right? Hey, I mean, I'm stubborn, but not quite that stubborn, but you know probably ambitious, but not that ambitious, but nonetheless so many have questions about identity and your relationship to a group or a tribe. As a Jewish-American you wrestle with those all the time

[00:18:16] and one person you may defend Israel if you feel like they're attacking Israel, but with my family I'll have fierce arguments, you know where I'm saying how can you defend Israel? Look at how their behavior? You know, so these questions about the relationship between yourself as an individual and the identity you're trying to construct and the group that has a pull on you and what are your obligations to that group and how is your identity, you know people have talked about this with Obama. Your identity is constantly shifting in response to context and the arguments you make in the sides you take and so on and I felt that with Mo, I just felt I was able to put a lot of that in Mo in a strange way and and I like that it made me realize that even though these are very particular questions about these different groups, they're also universal. And so that was a big part of it and I just, it just didn't feel there wasn't a character or place where it felt organic to the story to sort of have that be

[00:19:15] a big part of it. My sort of one rule in writing was just don't force anything because I think it should be there. It just, there was no character who came into my head who represented that particular viewpoint and I did think from time to time, you know, should I have more of that? But I just felt like the fact that I thinking about should I have more of it, meant that I wasn't going to try to force it into. And I feel like it gets written about a lot, it gets discussed a lot. I just didn't, I didn't force it. But it's a good question. Yes. So let me repeat her question, which was you know that her book group read the book and struggled a little with aspects of both Mo and Claire. With Claire was it her background or was it the arc of her? [unintelligible] Well I don't want to talk too much about the ending for people who haven't read it. In fact, I won't talk at all, but I will say to me and then when people who haven't read it get to the ending, there is a lot of ambiguity embedded or a lot of ruin regret embedded

[00:20:12] in the choices he makes in the end. I felt you know, there is a yearning there for home. I can talk more about his character leading up to that and information. I mean I, as I said, I sort of enjoy him frustrating readers because I always wanted his character and his nature to be a part of the story that he's shaping events rather than just being a passive victim of what's going on around him. And I also I read a lot about, I read a lot about both just artisan architects working in the public sphere and also people kind of at the center of controversy. So for example actually going back to your question, I read a lot a whole biography of cultural biography about the Dreyfus Affair in France where Alfred Dreyfus was a Jew who was accused of treason and, nothing in common with Mohammad Khan, and

yet he was very frustrating to his supporters because he refused to display emotion, he was very impassive and they wanted more from him. That played in a little bit to Mohammad Khan. I read a lot

[00:21:14] about Maya Lin. I read about Jørn Utzon who designed the Sydney Opera House, who again had this sort of you have a sort of stubborn, rigid personality because you need it to push things through without compromise and yet that ill equips you to deal with the politics around use. But the central thing for me with Mo was that I wanted him to be a little bit inscrutable or I felt like in the end the reader has to decide do they trust him or not and think about why. That was just one of the questions I wanted to leave you with. Its for me, it was not as simple as he retreats into his Islamic background at all. So maybe I don't know maybe your group can go back and reread the ending and see if there's anything else there. I don't know. Yes, yes. Oh, she said I don't know if you could hear she said she didn't feel he retreated into his his Islamic background as much as becoming a successful American businessman. I mean partly I was think I have the line in there that he's sort of capitalized

[00:22:14] on failure, which is a very American story in some ways. And also, you know part of me, without giving away the ending, there ways the world is changing and Americans more and more work abroad have to engage with abroad the rise of India and China and so on. And so part of it was about capturing some of that as well that we no longer, America is not the only story anymore in a way. Yes. I have the idea. I have the way I went think I want to structure it and I've mostly just been doing a lot of reading and thinking and note-taking. I have not yet started writing. It's a weird thing to think about your second novel as opposed to your first because as I said with your first you're just not aware of publishing it or audience or anything and so I literally just started writing when I had a little window of time. With this one I'm just more cautious in a way, which I'm not sure is a good thing, but I feel like I want to think more about what I'm doing and how I'm going to write it and at some point I probably

[00:23:16] just going to have to go for it and stop stop thinking. So the question was the controversy around the proposed Islamic community center near Ground Zero which kind of broke into the news in mid-2010. Was it an influence? So are you saying was it an influence on the writing of the novel or? So would that controversy kind of what relationship did it, does it have or what does it reveal maybe about how people might think about a Muslim architect being chosen. I mean what was interesting when that happened, I had finished my first draft and I'd been working on the novel for a few years. But I really had started to think of it as more of a historical novel than a contemporary novel in the sense that I was, things in New York at least just seemed almost normal and I had started to think, you know, maybe these feelings I'm exploring are gone and that I'm just writing about this particular piece of history two years after the attack. And I think when that happened I realized, and

[00:24:18] I sort of thought to myself, maybe it wouldn't be big deal if someone named Mohammed Khan won and everybody would be fine with it and why did I invent this whole story. And then when that happened I thought, okay, it would be a big deal. [Laughter] Those feelings are still there and it was really instructive for me. This was already is very strongly in the book, but it really made me think even more about it, of I feel like so much of the book is about the less interesting part of the book to

me is about the kind of over hatred, prejudice, fear, etc. And the more interesting part is with Claire for example, just the ambivalence deep inside us, the unacknowledged feelings and emotions and I saw a lot of that or had a lot of conversations around that with that controversy because friends who, you'd start out a conversation with them and they would say, of course they have the right to put it there and that's ridiculous, this is America. But as the conversation went on they'd sort of say I just wish they would put it

[00:25:13] 12 blocks away instead of two and, and I felt like people were deep down wrestling still with those doubts and uncertainties and suspicions and you know, you sort of say, well why and well I'm not saying they did it but it just makes me unc [inaudible]. People can't even articulate really what's deep down. And so that to me was sort of the, wouldn't say it's the most important thing in the book at all, but it is one of the places I felt like the book and fiction can work in a way. Because if you can't even articulate emotions you're having, you're certainly not gonna articulate them to a journalist or but they're there and I've had, I've had a lot of readers write to me and say just reading the book it made me wrestle with you know, some of what I have, the fears I have when I get on an airplane and see someone in traditional Muslim dress and so on and I think this especially but not at all exclusively for New Yorkers, there's just still still some of that there even ten years on. So the question is about how

[00:26:15] so many of the characters seem to have ulterior motives and say one thing publicly, but often have a whole other agenda operating. I just felt like I, again I think this is what fiction can do is there's always a more complicated story under what any of us present as our public selves and we all have whole psychological own personal histories and one of my concerns and writing the novel was how do those histories and psychological makeups and so on shape public events because we often segregate them or you know, we all, I wanted to explore the connections between them and I also felt that we have public selves and private selves and we all have more complicated motives than we often want to admit to and you know it maybe it's a slightly cynical view of human nature, but I think it's just human nature that we do have rivalries with our siblings that would be complicated by a heroic death in a lot of ways and to me that made someone like Sean just very human. To be reacting the way he did.

[00:27:21] But he's not going to stand up and say I feel this way about my brother and I feel an issue, you know, you don't, you act often without even realizing you're acting on these these feelings and impulses. You know I also the way the book is structured where you're both, one minute you're inside a character's head and then in the next scene you're in another character's head watching that character. I felt it allows you to see these gaps between how we read people and you encounter a person in a public encounter you make a lot of assumptions about them. You're often mystified by their behavior. To be able to almost take a reader behind the scenes, behind that mental scenes, and say here's what's really going on. In an ideal world maybe when you actually encounter real people that's in your head a tiny bit of there's actually a whole other world working inside their head that explains why they're being a jerk to me [laughter], why they're acting the way they do. That was some of my thinking. Well if anybody didn't

[00:28:17] hear the question, its when did this shorthand essentially of 9/11 take hold and why? [inaudible] That sounds right to me, but I'm not, I'm not sure, I don't remember. You know, I actually remember noticing more Ground Zero because initially it was sort of just a metaphor, right? Cause I can't even remember the original meaning or use of ground zero. Is it for a nuclear attack or right? So initially it was just used as kind of a metaphor and then you know to me it's so interesting at what point did this just become the name of this place and everybody took it for granted that this is Ground Zero. And it was just it was just a metaphor initially kind of. But I think you're right that journalists do seek short hands, um so I think a lot of it does come from journalists and in the whole writing of the book. I made the decision never to use 9/11 or Ground Zero. For that reason is that I think it's just become this shorthand that in a way it almost deadens I think a reader who sees it because you know soon

[00:29:22] as you see 9/11 it just conjures up, you know, either you sort of glaze over because we've all read so much about it or it conjures up your personal experience of that day and I felt like I don't want those short hands and kind of buzz words that we don't even think about what we're really talking about when we use them. So, but I don't know exactly when it took hold. But it's an interesting question. [Inaudible] I think, I'm sorry, the one I think in Britain the subway attacks [unintelligible] I think they're often called seven seven or referred to as seven seven. Yeah, 2008. Well for a while I was working on a book of short stories all connected to the economic collapse, I don't think I'm going to pursue it cause I think I'm more of a novel writer than a short story writer, but I was calling it The Day Lehman Died because [laughter] I felt like I kept meeting people who, the most random mix of people who would say, "Oh, yeah, you know, it's doing great as an artist until the day Lehman Brothers died and my phone stopped

[00:30:19] ringing." You know guy trying to sell his B&B in Upstate New York who said I was going to sell it and then I knew the day Lehman Brothers died I wouldn't be able to sell, you know, everybody kept phrasing it to that particular day. And so I was thinking the day Lehman died, you know sums up everything but you know, I don't know if I'll ever write that book. Yes, it definitely emerged organically. I mean, I think I knew, you know the one thing I'll say about the ending, it projects forward in time. I think that I knew fairly early on I wanted to do. But, I didn't know what you would see there and I felt like that had to emerge organically from the story and the characters and kind of their alchemy and I don't remember then it kind of came piece by piece. I mean there was the sort of basic decision of does the garden get built or not, which I'm not going to reveal but, that I had to resolve, but then just there were other elements that became part of the ending much later in the process. But

[00:31:18] I think I always felt like moving in time was just something I wanted to do because so much of the novel takes place in this very compressed kind of feverish time that I felt like the characters can't even see outside of it or see beyond it. So it was partly that and partly just what does time and aging due to all of us and how we see our past and events we were part of and I just felt emotionally it introduced a different tone that's more about regret and rue in a way than for a book where people are so at least publicly dug in and rigid for so much of the book. What would I just wanted something that felt different. She said, I guess that I gave away more than she would have asked in her question. [laughter] We'll be having a seminar the next room about the ending [laughter] after

[laughter] after the meeting. All right, so you so the question was about as I've been on book tour and hearing from readers were there things that surprised me or and also in particular groups struggling with questions of identity, how have they responded

[00:32:21] to or received the novel? Is that a fair? I mean for me, I think the really interesting things, so the books been at about eight months, is I almost feel like the conversations and responses to me have become part of the novel itself. Just in people react very differently and they take it very personally in a way that I didn't expect. And they take sides. And they're not always predictable. So I mean to me some of the most interesting responses are you know, liberals for example who want to kill Mo. I that's sort of, I like that Frank, but it's very interesting to me they're almost angry at me because it's not easy for them. You know, they want it to be easy to root for him and it's not always easy to root for him. Claire people sometimes feel very personally betrayed in a way because they've identified her with her to a point and then you know, the one thing I realized early on is that once you publish a novel you don't own it anymore. There were responses that discomfited me or surprise me,

[00:33:24] but I can't say "that's not right, that's not what I meant," you know. No, you can't think that about x y or z. I just, I don't own it anymore and that I've had a certain process of surrender. I have heard from quite a few Muslim Americans who read the book and I've met with some groups, and again the same idea that the conversations feel like an extension of the novel in a really interesting way because, even if as they usually are they're very different from Mo, you know, they don't drink or you know, do many of the things he does, just these same questions about is it our responsibility to assuage the fears about us? You know, why should we have to do that as Americans? But is it self-destructive not to do? These are the conversations people, Muslims are still having. I've had people stand up and say how long are we going to have to sort of just again with stopped at the airport or whatever? How long are we going to have to pay a price for our fellow Americans feeling secure? So it's just

[00:34:26] to me been very moving to kind of hear and witness some of these conversations. So the question is about they are, they're actually still building. They just topped it with a floor that now makes it taller than the Empire State Building. The new I think technically it's not called the Freedom Tower anymore as it was originally, but this building being built right next to the site, you know, so the question is sort of was there controversy about it and this impulse to again build high and yeah, I think there was some controversy about it. There was certainly a debate about how do we respond architecturally and to me I look at that building and I see kind of there is America over the last decade embodied in that building both the, we will come back stronger, taller, we cannot be defeated. And yet the entire first 12 floors are pure concrete because we don't want to be you know, we don't want it to be car bombed. And so it looks horrible. A lot of the book in a way is about how architecture

[00:35:25] embodies so many of our fears and anxieties and evolution. And so I just that to me is what that building is. It's not a great building. I think, I think the desire to go taller than the Empire State Building is just, feels slightly juvenile to me. I don't know but that's just one woman's opinion. And so the question is sort of about why haven't there been more novels that deal with September

11th. I think there's probably been more than you think. I think some of them are very good novels but not necessarily because of the way they deal with September 11. Sometimes it's almost like a plot device of here's the disaster that changes everything and that I mean, there's been an interesting mix. I haven't read *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, but you know my sense that is about sort of grief and loss. But then there's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which I don't know if any of you have heard of is a totally different kind of book. It's about a Pakistani-American who goes back to his country and

[00:36:24] it has these very ambivalent feelings about America. So there's a whole range. I didn't feel like they were very many, if any, that really dealt with just the aftermath in America and these questions of who are we now and you know, what, what values needed to be renegotiated because of this which didn't and certainly very few about just American-Muslims as sort of complex human characters. You know, I think with time there will be a growing body of literature. I'm always, even when my book came out people said, oh, here's the 9/11 novel and I don't think there is or should be a 9/11 [unintelligible] to there's too much connected to it that I think it will over time require a body of literature to deal with for readers. So the question is about the Asma, the Bangladeshi widow in the book, but also the whole community of immigrants and many illegal immigrants that she's part of, when did that sort of become part of the story. I can't remember exactly when I first started thinking about Asma as a character.

[00:37:33] I think as I was reading it's old news stories and things looking at when I started working on the novel think I there were widows from Bangladesh or Pakistan or something, so I started thinking about just that idea going back to Claire being sort of the ultimate insider. What would it feel like to be entirely outside of this process and yet have the same investment in it. And so that idea really stayed with me and I started thinking about Asma and you know, I had covered New York a lot before September 11th and just had always been very interested in these different communities kind of existing side by side and yet we kind of see them but don't see them and trying to capture, I actually one of the very few people in the book who is inspired by a real person is Nasruddin who is sort of the mayor of Little Dhaka because my landlord when I lived in Brooklyn in the late 90s had been Bangladeshi do repair a lot of brownstones and there was this guy who was amazing to me because he was always

[00:38:32] telling me, "Yeah, I fix everything for my community and I'm doing this and trying to deal with the schools" and I just wanted to have that face in the book and you know, he always really just liked him as a character so that was there. And then the piece about her being illegal, but getting this payout and came later because I read a news story about that was the actual situation for a small group of 9/11 families where they were illegal or their husbands or spouses were illegal and so they did get compensation yet had to hide essentially until a couple years ago Congress gave them permanent residency I think. It was interesting even the way the form of the book I felt like mirrored the actual real life in the sense that you are reading about Asma for so much of the book without exactly knowing why you're reading about her because she doesn't intersect with the plot. I mean, she's literally outside of it and yet so I as a writer had to think how do I hold your interest in this person even though

[00:39:33] you have no idea why you're reading about her. And so it's sort of to me mimicked life in a way of how do you get people to see and care about these people even if they don't have a direct reason to? So the title The Submission, how did I come upon it? My original title when I was working on the book was The Garden and I had that for a while and then I was once I had an agent and before he found a publisher, I was talking to him and saying I just feel like it's a little bit flat and just and he said oh, yeah, I think so too, even though he had never said anything before that. So we were talking and sort of I think he first said if it was about a woman it would be great to call it The Submission and I thought actually if it was about a woman I would never call it The Submission [Laughter] that would just be wrong and creepy but I don't see why it matters. You know, it actually works incredibly well because it's about a submission to a competition and Islam meaning, you know submission to God and so that

[00:40:32] was my original, you know, here's why I like this at least has these two meanings. But then as I was working on the book, yeah just it was interesting as a writer to keep suddenly discovering new residences for the title constantly with all of the characters and just realizing that in a way that's one of the central questions of the novel, is when do you submit and why and to whom and what is your relationship to family, religion, country? And you know again going back to these ideas about how to use it as an individual and especially in America, which is so much about the individual and yet we are also tied to these various loyalties just seemed I was very happy with the title. I don't have a title for my next book and it's really bothering me. I do but it's an unwieldy title. So I have to keep working on them. I submitted the manuscript. The funny thing was my publisher. When when he bought it. He said, "I kind of think it should just be called The Garden," and I said no I've been there. We're

[00:41:32] not calling it The Garden. But the entire time right up until publication he kept balking at the title, and he finally said it's because all I do all day is get submissions [Laughter] of people submitting a manuscript. It's not a poetic word to me. You know, [Laughter] it's really funny, but my editor kept saying to him, "It's the best title, just leave it alone." Yeah, it's kind of funny. Anyway, thank you so much. After I do signing if anybody has questions about the ending, I think that what they want to talk about we could do that separately. I have another idea. Okay, normally in Seattle Reads, we do get to talk about and we get to ask the author about the ending. You will remember those of you who are here last year when Chris Cleave was here he gave I thought one of the most thoughtful, interesting answers about why an ambiguous ending. So those of you who have read the book you stay here for, you know, five minutes. Okay? Okay, good. Okay, so maybe you know, I'm going to let you kind of ask your question as you would

[00:42:33] like to ask it. That's what I meant about how time changes how you see things and I don't think it's a clear-cut ending at all and even looking at Claire sort of apologizing, being angry, nothing is nobody's purely changed. Part of it for me too is that in some ways I feel like we've kind of moved past 9/11 and part of the book is saying we should move past it in the sense that it's become this religion and yet at the same time I did want in the end to also say these are losses that will never their permanent absences. And what does it mean to live with that and have you shape your life? I felt like partly because I had lived in South Asia and just felt more comfortable writing about someone from

that background. I felt like I knew it better and I also felt like, you know, the majority of Muslims in the world are outside of the Middle East. It's not a fact we hear often, but it's true. And so I thought why should he be from the Middle, you know just because that's sort of what we're afraid

[00:43:35] of and focused on but if you're just writing about a Muslim he could be from Indonesia because that has more Muslims I think than any country in the world. And so that's why I was sort of to push back against that and say there's no reason you should be from the Middle East. I thought about it, you know, would it be even a bigger deal if he was from the Middle East, but I kind of felt like in American eyes and Muslims and Muslim, you know, at least in this controversy. I don't think it would have, I didn't think it needed that for him to be scary to Americans. And part of the point also was how we project our fears whether or not they're warranted said that it didn't matter where he was from or what his background was or whether he was religious or not. You know, that is part of the story that it just didn't matter. Once people begin to see him a certain way and project a lot around him it didn't matter what his background was. Also sort of the point is that he was an architect and certainly

[00:44:24] in his own mind, well before he was a Muslim and so the whole book is about him saying wait a minute. Further that a lot of that came from reading about Maya Lin who, she literally I read one interview with her she said I saw myself as white, like it was shocking to her when people were writing in saying you're a gook, how can you design, you know, because she grew up in Athens, Ohio and so how you self-identify and what's important to you and your identity versus what the world is imposing on you. That was it. He is forced into a corner in a way and there are things that come out of it exploring his relationship Islam and what Islam is comes out of this but he is primarily an architect and you know, yes, I read a lot about architects and tried to capture a lot of that personality. And and to me yes, the the course of the book is shaped much more by that personality than in a way by any thing that comes out of him being a Muslim. She said that she loved the ending because of the ambiguity.

[00:45:19] No, I mean one of the things in the ending I was telling Chris this I think you know with the Quran being on the walls I had a woman come up to me at a reading and she said "I just want to know what it says," and I said the whole point is that you don't know and you have to decide what you think and you have think about why do you think what you think, you know that's kind of where I want to leave you in a way. But it was funny because she said "I just need to know what it says, so I can know what to think," [Laughter] and that's got to like I'm not gonna tell you what to think. So

[00:45:49] 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.