



Library podcast

Seattle Reads - Main Event" with Angela Flournoy

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[00:00:36] Good evening I'm Marcellus Turner and I am your City Librarian. Welcome to our 2017 Seattle reads event a celebration of the Turner house with Northwest Tap connection. The African-American writers Alliance and author Angela Flournoy whom I just had the pleasure of meeting. This is the 19th year of the Seattle reads program and its renowned Seattle read series hundreds of one book community reading programs have taken place all over the country and internationally and we're proud that the project originated here. Thank you. Fitz was the inspiration of two of our former staff Nancy Pearl and Chris Hogan she who began the program back in 1998. We'd like to thank our Seattle Reed sponsors the Wallace Foundation The Seattle Times for their generous promotional support for library programs and media sponsor KUOW for him. We're also particularly grateful to this year's Community Partners Northwest African-American museum the Black Heritage Society of Washington Elliott Bay Book Company and Langston. And finally special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation and thousands of people in our community who make gifts to benefit the library. This private support makes Seattle reads possible in addition to hundreds of library programs free library programs and services. Every year so to library foundation donors who are with us today. Thank you so very much for your support. Now let me turn things over to Special Brandon. The literature and humanities program manager who directs how Seattle reads program to introduce to the rest of tonight's event.

[00:02:32] Thanks so much empty. Every year we work with an artistic organization to create original work inspired by the Seattle read selection. This year we are delighted to partner with two amazing arts organizations the African-American writers alliance and Northwest tap connection. Tonight's program will be a feast will open and close with poetry from members of the African-American writers alliance. The alliance is a diverse and dynamic collective a Seattle area writers of African descent. The group regularly reads at our Columbia City branch and they were kind enough to write a selection of original poetry on themes of home and family which are integral to the Turner house. After the opening poems Angela will present a few short passages from the book and then throughout the evening. The amazing dancers at Northwest tap connection will share three original pieces inspired by those chapters of The Turner House. And for those of you who might like to follow along with your

book The Dance performances were inspired by the chapters 1 north to south. Trouble in the big room and every Turner dances. So here to open our celebration please help me welcome Minnie Collins and Nakia is about

[00:03:49] That evening the title of this poem is who helps really cool house.

[00:04:00] I'm on the rim near the edge zigzag a most harried days trekking back and forth to my hope place. It's my shelter a relief from storms rain snow wind and what ever comes at me but

[00:04:26] At my whole place. You are welcome to my living room. Here in this space are heroes myths blues and ragtime that speak for me and to me coffee tea coke or day old treats. Sometimes available for the asking but don't hesitate to find your private space and my hope please you might need to freshen up in my bathroom. Wash your face your underwear. Even change if necessary because tissue rolls are free for unexpected sneezes runs or even other leaks. Of course now you've got to smoke outside of my hope place but yet in my home place you might see me as restless unnerving or trouble makers sometimes I can become shaking those conventional Guess who decry me as a lazy restless not good enough even change Europe's my haven is hope for the misplaced the lost the overdo. The spine broken. Gently used a brand new my hope Haven has no hierarchy no privilege no discrimination my haven my hope please accept me just as I am my haven welcomes all to this big living room I persevere survive in a really cool house it's the coolest house in Intel. It's the real cool house Seattle Public Library. A haven of

[00:06:49] Applause Good evening.

[00:06:51] So the spoken word piece I'm going to be sharing tonight is entitled home sometimes I wish to farm away and fly my way back home. Sometimes I wish the farm away in fly my way back home. Sometimes I wish the farm away. Sometimes I wish to fly away. Sometimes I wish the farm away and fly my way back home.

[00:07:25] Sometimes I wish I'd found my way in fly my way back home. See. Could you take me back home where there was a sense that I belonged in abalone. Because I was home.

[00:07:38] You see there was no need for me to. Because what was right in front of me was that unconditional love and there I

[00:07:44] Didn't have to be strong because there would always belong and there could even be wrong so take me back to that place where there are no worries. Take me back to that place where there are no fears. Take me back to that place where I simply believe.

[00:08:01] See sometimes life ruptures my mind like a whirlwind and although I try.

[00:08:05] It seems too hard to fly it instead of quiet it seems like my life just to make me see but every time my wife tries to make me sick my heart never misses a beat in the same things that seem

to be bleak are the same things that allow me to peek into the sky and allow me to fly. Fly high so sometimes I wish I'd find my way and fly my way back home see could you take me back home where there was a sense that I belonged and I belonged because I was home. You see there was no need for me to fret because what is right in front of me is

[00:08:48] Thank you so much. Many in the Nakia.

[00:08:50] That's amazing. So we're pleased to welcome Angela Flournoy Angeles been a 5 under 35 honoree by the National Book Foundation Her fiction has appeared in The Paris Review and she's written for The New York Times The New York New Republic and The Los Angeles Times A graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop Angeles taught at the University of Iowa and the writers Foundry at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn. As many of you are probably aware of the Turner house was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Center for fiction First Novel Prize a Sunday book as sorry a New York Times Sunday Book Review Editors Choice and now the most prestigious award of all the 2017 Seattle reading selection. Right. And I just I love the quote the National Book Foundation declared the book a striking examination of the price we pay for our dreams and futures and the ways in which our families bring us home which I think is just a beautiful way to encapsulate the book Angela's going to take the stage in just a few minutes but before she does. Please help me welcome Northwest tap connection. Performing one north to south. All aboard. Northbound Detroit three minutes. Is bound to

[00:10:29] Draw. This. Is bound to grow. This. Is. Bound for Glory if you want to ride on it you gotta be. This. Is bound for glory. This. This. Is a. This. Is. This. Is a claim to

[00:11:01] Give about embodied in Jesus man. Let's get. To. This man. Who was this man. Yeah. This. Gig. Got. My. This. Lot. This. GIRL. THIS. IS. A plane try. This. This. A great. Day. This. Is a great. Ride. You gotta. Get. This. This. Can no gamblers just. This lame. Duck. Look at

[00:11:59] This. Can. I. Go. Drink. No. Like. This. No candle. This. Is bound for glory.

[00:12:16] This may. This. Is bad. But do. Not. Read

[00:12:25] This. If you want to be on it you gotta be. Cause this train is bound for glory

[00:13:08] They are amazing. Hello everyone I'm very happy to be here today. I'd like to thank the Seattle Public Library in the Seattle Public Library Foundation as well as my gracious host and escort Sarah Brandon as well as Marcellus Turner the president of the library or head library. City Library. And. For

[00:13:30] What has been a really memorable week.

[00:13:33] I had no idea so many people in Seattle would care about these people I made up who live in Detroit so it has been really eye opening and humbling and thank you to the northwest tap

connection and the Northwest African-American writers association for taking time to think about my work and how it might influence their own art. That is something I never expected and I really appreciate any time that one has to write to a prompt. It's hard. Thank you sir. Here we are one north summer in 1944 the city had its own time and cruelty.

[00:14:13] There was cruelty in the country too but it was plain not veiled beneath promises of progress nor subtle when it manifested itself. Francis took in the high domed roof the glittering marble floors and the multitude of quarters as he walked one steps into a place like this a palace like the kinds that Abraham and his wife Sarah turned up in he thought and felt impossibly small just a dim light easily blown out. Francis arrived at Michigan Central Station with a small bag. His only pair of shoes on his feet and fifteen dollars in one pocket and a letter for a pastor and the other. He'd hoped for a different letter from the one he carried. It did not introduce him as a clever young man worthy of apprenticeship in the Lord's work. That letter and any chances of a preacher's life were gone. Reverend Matthews I trust that you will be able to assist Francis Turner of my flock with securing housing in a good word at one of the fabled places of industry in your city. He is open to any work available. He and I will both be much obliged with faith in our Lord. Reverend Charles Williams Tufts spring of faith missionary Baptist church Arkansas. Francis had opened the letter as the train thundered through Kansas. It was early morning in the sky out the window a stretched wide and black and endless.

[00:15:34] That phrase of my flock was impersonal as if he and Fred and Reverend Tufts had not lived under the same roof as if they were casual acquaintances. He deserved more warmth than that. A few words lift him from the ranks of ordinary congregation member to favored almost son. The Reverend could have called his friend ahead of time. He had a phone line in his house and Francis was sure the other man had one too. Putting the letter in Francis's hand ensured that he would have to look the man up humble himself before a stranger and beg his case he couldn't bring himself to use such a letter especially not one so impersonal he kept it in his pocket for the duration of the train ride. This was how it had been done since Henry Ford first took a paternal interest in Negro employment in the cheap labor it provided manufacturers depended on up north ministers to supply them with reliable workers and those ministers reached out to their Southern colleagues for help filling the positions. But that was before the war. Who needed a note of introduction in the city on the forefront of the war effort. Francis had read that there were more jobs available in Detroit than in the entire state of Arkansas.

[00:16:46] Pride had always played a prominent role in the Turner psyche. Its source went back further than Cha-Cha and Layla's generation passed Francis is to officially Francis Turner. Turner senior died in 1930 from a rusty nail puncture to the bottom of his left foot. But it was pride that did him in. He stopped. He stepped on the nail walking back from the fields he sharecroppers in the soles of his shoes were so worn that nothing prevented the corroded metal from piercing him nearly the bone. He hobbled home to his wife and his six year old son and let his wife dress the wound. Francis senior ignored Cynthia Turner's pleas to go see a doctor for monetary reasons but also out of pride. There were no doctors in their town and Francis senior could not imagine sitting for a White Pine Bluff doctor over a cut on his foot. He doubted the doctor would be willing to even step inside his house

and he would not let any doctor tend to him in the yard as if you were an animal. It was not an arbitrary selfish sort of pride. For Francis senior losing a little dignity he'd held onto as a black man in the south seemed a more concrete defeat than death. Two weeks later Cynthia was a widow and the debt Francis senior left her led to eviction.

[00:17:59] She and her son moved into a one room shack that was one bad storm away from being no more than a lean to. After two years of scraping by Cynthia found a live in maid job in Little Rock. She entrusted young Francis to Reverend toughs a widower himself and sent money when she could. Pride worked in mysterious ways on Francis much like the God he worshiped. Pride prevented him from using Reverend toughs letter of introduction to get a good job and maybe even free rent for a while. But he was not too proud to ask strangers for help. At the train station in Detroit he chatted up a porter who directed him to a janitor who told him to head to a house of Hastings and see about renting a room. He had a gift for conversation for making people feel at ease. It wasn't his words exactly. Reverend toughs always said that Francis was eloquent in his head but still too much a country Negro out his mouth. It was his looks he supposed. He was tall and slender without lapsing into frail and his skin was the color of baked right cornbread. He'd learned early on that folks assigned all sorts of qualities to skin like his and that a certain type of middle aged woman would always consider a yellow boy somehow trustworthy the sort of young man who would help carry a load of groceries and not run off with them.

[00:19:13] Yes colored person after colored person for advice until he climbed aboard a street car headed for Paradise Valley. The best way to avoid feeling too small for a place was to pretend you'd been there before. It was Francis's first time on a street car. But after the lurching claustrophobia of the train ride another first the wide open windows were welcome on Hastings. Amongst so many certified Negroes Francis tried to feel like one of them. He dawdled in front of a chicken shack. He didn't dare spend his money and. He stood in front of a vegetable cart and lamented the power of up north tomatoes. He broke down and bought a plum founded sour. But he did anyway. Poor folks and the better off were out couples shopping and mothers with children in tow. It was Saturday. It only had liquor a couple of times in his 20 years. A neighbor's moonshine made his throat while when he was 13. But he thought that after seeing about a room he'd find himself a nice place to sit and have a drink. There would be working men at a bar and maybe he'd find his way into a job.

[00:20:15] Thank you. Applause

[00:20:21] Applause Thanks so much Angela. So we are now going to have North West tap connection perform trouble in the big room. I think the dancers might be getting in place though so bear with us one second.

[00:22:06] Thank you so much. That was great. It's very hard to play a ghost. So. I admire that performance a lot.

[00:22:16] Trouble in the big room. The eldest six of Francis invited attorneys 13 children claimed that the big room of the house on Euro Street was haunted for at least one night a ghost. Hey if you will try

to pull Cha-Cha out of the big room second story window the big room was not in actuality very big. Could hardly be considered a room for some other family might have made a decent storage closet or a mother's cramped sewing room for the turn as it became the only single occupancy bedroom in their overcrowded house. A rare and coveted space in the summer of 1958. Cha cha the eldest at 14 years was in the throes of a gangly legged croaky voiced adolescence smelling himself vital to called it tired of sharing a bed with younger brothers who peed and kicked and drooled and blanket hogged charge I woke up one evening untangled himself from his brothers Aaron limbs and stumbled into the one not closet across the hall. He slept on the floor curled up with his back against dusty boxes and started a tradition from then on. When one turned a child got grown and gone as Francis described it. The next eldest child crushed the threshold into the big room.

[00:23:24] The haunting according to the other children occurred during the very same summer that the big room became a bedroom. Lonnie the youngest child then was the first to witness the heinous attack he'd just begun visiting the bathroom alone and was headed there when he had the opportunity to save his brother's life. 3 year old year of a tenuous reliability but to this day Lonnie recalls the form of a pale hued young man lifting torture by his pajama collar out of the bed and toward the narrow window. Back then a majority of the homeowners in that part of Detroit's Eastside were still white and the street had no empty lots tchotchkes sneaking out torches sneaking out with a white boy Lonnie saying he stamped his little feet on the floorboards in Quincy and Russell spilled into the hallway. They saw cha cha all elbows and fists swinging at the hate it had let go of tchotchkes color and was now on the defensive Quincy would later insist that the hate emitted a blue electric looking light in each time such as fist connected with its a body. The entire thing flickered like a faulty lamp. Seven year old Russell fainted. Little Lonnie stood transfixed a pool of urine at his feet. His eyes open wide. I'm very happy.

[00:24:27] There was no urine just now. Quincy banged on his parents locked bedroom door. Violent Francis Turner we're not in the habit of waking up to tend to ordinary child nightmares or bedwetting levels. Francis Franzi the I the eldest girl at 12 burst into the crowded hallway. Justice Jojo was giving the hate his worse. She would later say the Heinz skin had a jellyfish like translucency and the pupils of its eyes were huge dark death. Let them go a run Cha-Cha Francis said here running me out of here a teacher yelled back. With the exception of Lonnie who had been crying for Turner children in the hallway fell silent they'd heard plenty of tales of mischievous Haynes from their cousins down south. They pushed people in a Wells made hangman dance in midair. So I did not follow that a spirit from the other side would have I have to spend several minutes fighting off a territorial 14 year old Ferrante possessed an aptitude for level headedness in the face of crisis. She decided she'd seen enough of this paranormal beat down. She marched into George's room grabs her brother brother by his stretched out collar and dragged him into the hall. She slammed the big room door behind them and pulled charges to the floor.

[00:25:32] They landed in Lonnie's piss that paint tried to run me out of the room Cha-Cha said. He wore the indignant look eyebrows raised lips parted of someone who has suffered an unbearable affront. There ain't no Hanes in Detroit Francis Turner said. His children jerked at the silent sound of his voice. That was how he existed in their lives. Suddenly they're on his own time. His quiet authority

augmenting the air in a room. He stepped over their skinny brown legs and opened the big room's door. Francis Turner called Cha-Cha into the room. The window was open in the base sheets from churches bed hung over the sill look under the bed. Cha-Cha looked behind the dresser. Nothing there. Put them she's back where they belong. Cha-Cha obliged. Your father's orders. His father's eyes on him as he worked. When he finished she sat down on the bed unprompted and rubbed his neck. Francis Turner sat next to him. I know Haynes and Detroit son. He did not look at Cha-Cha try to run me out of the room. I don't know what all happened. But it wasn't that torture opened his mouth then closed it. If you ain't grown enough to sleep by yourself I suggest you move on back across the hall.

[00:26:38] Francis Turner stood up to go face to son. He reached for George's collar pulled it open and put his index finger into the line of irritated skin below the Adam's apple. For a moment charged I saw the spectre of true panic in his father's eyes. Then Francis his face settled into an ambivalent frown. It'll be gone in a day or two he said in the hallway. The other children stood lined up against the wall. Marlene child number five and a big bit sickly had finally come out of the girl's room. Francine and Quincy cleanup Lonnie's mess and all your best go to sleep. I don't wanna hear nobody talking about a tire. Come morning Francis Turner closed his bedroom door. The mask was cleaned up but no one not even a little Lonnie slept in the right bed that night. How could they with the window curtains puffing out and sucking in like gauzy lungs in the breeze. The children crowded into Church's room a privileged first visit for most of them and retold versions of the night's events. There are many disagreements about the Haynes appearance and whether it had said anything during the tussle with cha cha. Quincy claimed the thing had winked at him as it stood in the doorway which meant that the big room should be his. Francis said that Haynes didn't have eyelids so it couldn't have winked at all. Marlene insisted that she'd been in the hall with the rest of them throughout the ordeal but everyone teased her for showing up late for the show. In the end the only thing agreed upon was that the harm was real and that living with it was the price one had to pay for having the big room.

[00:28:01] Everyone Cha-Cha included thought the worry was worth it like hand-me-down clothes. The legacy of the hain't faded as the years went by for a few years. The Haynes appearance and Church's triumph over it remains an indisputable evergreen truth. It didn't matter that no subsequent resident of the big room had a night to rival Charles none of them ever admitted to hearing so much as a tap on the window during their times there. The original event was so remarkable that it did not require repetition. Tojo took on an elevated status among the first six children he had landed a punch on a hate and was somehow still breathing. But with each additional child he came along the story lost some of his luster. By the time it reached Layla the 13th and final turn in child Francis Turner's five word rebuttal. I know Haynes in Detroit was more famous within the family than the story behind it. It first gained a place in the Learner Turner lexicon as a way to refute a claim especially one that very well might be true a signal of the Speaker's refusal to discuss the matter further. The first six confident that Francis Turner simply believed in the Haynes existence popularized this usage by Layla's youth. The phrase had mutated mutated into an accusation of leg pulling. Daddy said if I get a name Mrs. Paulson he let me come on it. Come with him on his truck and trip to Oregon or gone. Come on man. I know Haynes in Detroit. Applause. Well. We have time for some questions and then we're going to welcome

[00:29:38] Melba and Alex. Alex played Francis in our first piece and Melba ACO is the founder and artistic director at Northwest connection. And Angela will take over my spot at the podium and so we'll get some microphones for you for Q and A. Just one sec.

[00:29:57] Can I start with a question.

[00:29:59] I have a question for Melba. Thank you so much John. As I said this is the first time I've experience someone translating my work into a different art form and particularly the first scene which is it has a song that's familiar from sort of later in the book trains to glory where this train is bound for glory.

[00:30:18] But it also incorporates something from the beginning of the book I just wanted to know a little bit about how that came to be you know reading this book for me was sort of like a journey and I felt like when we talked about core graphing for it I thought I had a down pack and then I would I would look at chapter and think OK I think this could work over here but then I would read farther down into the book and feel like I'd missed the whole point of everything and so when when we looked at Frances going up to Detroit I kind of really read about this young man who first of all had a lot of disillusionment about the relationship that he had had with the Reverend and that he thought that it would have been a little bit more personable. And that was really hard for Francis that he stood on that train thinking that he was going to this the land of milk and honey for better living and a better life and that he had the support and all of a sudden the support that he had expected was poor from underneath him. And then it was kind of like I'm going to do it on my own. But then when he got what what he thought was milk and honey came a little bit on the southwest side. It was completely disillusionment. As to the land of milk and honey and that was very very difficult go for him and that he fell apart into this. You know when I when you look at him a young man who imagine himself going to Detroit to work along with a pastor in a church and so to be an assistant pastor and suddenly find himself into a whole different type of lifestyle where he's no longer in communication with his wife that he's drinking and he's doing all these sinful things. But then I found out if I started to read a little bit more about it is that the Hank had actually been seen by. Spoiler alert

[00:32:12] It's OK. Go ahead. So many people raise their hand and said they had read so it's OK.

[00:32:15] You know what I mean. He thought that that was so it was a spiritual being that was telling him from God. What he needed to do a calling and then for that to be turned away when he went and talked to the pastor about that this was something that was more evil. Then you started to realize that that's where the rainbow hangs in Detroit because when he walked out on that train station he left all of that behind him and then with that song you know it was almost like there's this struggle that goes on where it really within black church. As I listened to it because I knew that song very well there was a couple that used to sing that at our church all the time but didn't I thought about the fact that that song itself was a life learning experience for Francis because it wasn't just about a song but it was a reminder for him as to how to live his life as it talked about no sinners that this is. You got to be holy to be on this train that you got to do the right thing. And then I saw the imagine that the song played a

real important point throughout the book because the children all recognize the song. And then if you listen to the lyrics and really look into it the children a lot of them was living the life of this song. And so for Francis and a lot of ways you know it was almost like whistling that song for the children was a reminder of them to behave. And a reminder for him himself not to take that step back but to try to live that holy life.

[00:33:53] I was trying to find the lyrics which it's a shame I don't just have off the top of my head. But yeah.

[00:34:01] So I never actually knew the words of that song myself.

[00:34:05] So I was really delighted to hear you find them and incorporate them into your piece because I had to google them down myself.

[00:34:16] Where are they. Oh here they are.

[00:34:19] So the ones that I put in a book and this train is bound for glory this train this train is bound for glory. This train this train don't pull no wankers no crap shooters nor whiskey drinkers this train is bound for glory.

[00:34:32] This train. So there's a whole list of all the people who can't be on the train that

[00:34:38] Are man altitude right. And many of us on certain days. And it's funny one thing that happens when you write a book is that there are ways that readers make connections that you don't necessarily make. Francis comes to Detroit on a train. But there was absolutely no conscious connection in my mind between the song that I chose. The song was just one that I liked and I remember from my childhood even I didn't know the lyrics. There was no connection in my mind sort of symbolically between him arriving on a train and trying to leave certain things behind but becoming like a person with Vice. And then the song that he's always humming so you just made a connection for me that I had to not have the thinking

[00:35:23] That's amazing. As do any of you have questions. So

[00:35:31] When you first started writing this book what did it start with with which elements did it start. What was it. Detroit was family ties.

[00:35:41] It was a person. I'm so I would say that before I had a person I didn't have a book. I had things I didn't like about the state of the house my father grew up in. But I have. Plenty of things in life. I don't like that they don't necessarily end up being a book. So for me I'm a writer who really writes out of character.

[00:35:59] I don't really trust my ideas but I trust people. They can be the engine. It's not an idea of I've come up on my own channel achieving what is art of fiction interviewing a piercing view. He just

talks about how an idea on its own is not a novel but if you have characters a characters can be the engine that drive a novel forward. There are plenty of idea driven novels but for me I have to have a person.

[00:36:24] And so I had been bothered for about 10 months about the state of the house my father grew up on and on the east side of Detroit. But I was going to do anything sort of artistically with it. But what I started to sort of see is a woman I Because the thing that particularly bothered me is that no one wanted to live in that house and it's like well what do you do with the house that no one wants to live in it was a point of it was the point of trying to figure out what to do with it.

[00:36:45] And I started to think who might want to live in it. And I just started to have this image of a woman creeping around the house at night and that woman was Layla 13th turn her child and she was the beginning of the book. If there wasn't Layla there would be no book because I would just have gripes. I would just have things that bothered me.

[00:37:03] So it was really her and sort of the process of exploring why she might want to be on that house where her history was everyone else sort of came out of that.

[00:37:14] Did you have surprises while you wrote it. Things that happen.

[00:37:19] A lot of surprises. I think one surprise is the way that I ended up really using the book to talk about a lot of things that I didn't necessarily know I was interested in like and all of the ways that I ended up researching like urban planning and like homeownership in the city of Detroit. I didn't I wouldn't have said at the time that I had any interest in those things but they seemed to be very important to the story. So I just like went down all those various rabbit holes and it surprises me that. When I talk to people they told me the book is about a completely different thing and that is because somehow I was able to kind of shoehorn all of these different elements like I've people say the book is all about addiction because all about family the book is all about a hair inheritance and that is because I was somehow able to cram it all in here which is a surprise because I didn't think I was going to write about any of that.

[00:38:09] I thought I was going to write about this one woman one just one more question the number of kids 13 kids. Was that something you decided before started writing the whole thing.

[00:38:21] That's a long story but basically I wanted to have a large amount of kids like more than sort of a contemporary like sort of normal amount whatever normal is. And I had first settled on 10 My father's the fifth the 13 I did not want 13 because of that but there were some other books around at the time with like 10 11 12 siblings and so I decided to just go for the number that seemed like a sign to me that I should go with a number that was I was comfortable with thanks for acknowledging book people.

[00:38:57] And so I don't know if you put this in but for me your story is set in Detroit reminded me of August Wilson's radio golf Oh I don't know if you have familiarity with that but there again it's a family

home in a northern black neighborhood and dealing with that construct so I don't know. Did you draw any inspiration from any of the plays of August Wilson.

[00:39:19] Certainly that's another well that is the art of playwriting but that is another of some one of the things I do when I'm procrastinating is I have I have all of my sort of like literary heroes that have kind of snatched off the parachute view website.

[00:39:36] They're like long form interviews about what they do in their career until August Wilson's is another one that I've read and reread often and I was actually talking at it I can't reveal which branch it was I think it was Ballard a woman asked me like what sort of other literature deals with the Great Migration. And I think because people really didn't understand as a culture we're sort of always understanding things and then forgetting them.

[00:40:01] So I don't think that Isabel Wilkerson was the first person who really helped us understand like sort of the magnitude of the great migration but recently when we forgot it and they needed to be reminded again. I would say it was Isabel Wilkerson. And I think because of the time period that Wilson was working in a lot of people didn't really see his plays that way they certainly are about like the tension of going to this place that is supposed to be like the better place and finding that that's not the case right. And so many different ways.

[00:40:34] And I think that that is something that ended up being really central to my book as an outcropping of sort of like character and really trying to figure out care for certain backgrounds and motivations which if you want to talk about sort of like character driven work. Wilson certainly is it's there's capital issues but then there's more than that there's just sort of interpersonal really more intimate issues that make the work really kind of memorable and timeless so I'm almost hesitant to ask his questions about halfway through the novel early on as you actually read this passage.

[00:41:12] They'd heard plenty of tales of mischievous hints from their cousins down south they pushed people into Wells made hang men dance in midair.

[00:41:20] And to me that kind of imagery screamed like clan Southern terrorism and then later on in Cha-Cha as experienced the he notices the hate to be something that's been kind of dormant in his life. Beyond the point that it manifests. Obviously I'm wondering if you could elaborate maybe on how intergenerational trauma it might play into the themes of this book because it's been something that's been on my mind lately both in my personal life and also reading the novel and seeing how the different problems manifest with each generation.

[00:41:52] So one of the things that I always found sort of interesting and complicated about the stories I would hear from my grandparents older people my family about paints is there was usually not always but there were sometimes sometimes the hand whatever somebody like ex-husband or something but sometimes a lot of times there was like an undercurrent of racial violence related to this person and whether it was like some old dad angry mistress like you know or whatever it was.

There was an undercurrent of that and I wanted to kind of have like very subtle notes of that besides that because you're not done beating it.

[00:42:35] I would just say you're on the right track.

[00:42:38] But I do.

[00:42:40] And if any of you have been at it the other events you've probably heard me say it over and over I do hesitate to put sort of too fine a symbolic point on like what the hate is doing in the book because first and foremost I'm having fun with the Hey I just decided in the beginning when I was thinking about what could be like the family law and tradition that I was gonna use one that I was familiar with but that I didn't really know how it could exist in a different landscape which is like a northern landscape. And so I decided to do that and that was one of the big technical challenges I set for myself. And so first and foremost it's me as a writer deciding how I'm going to make this work how can I make this interesting and not repetitive and then it ended up because sort of these things happened in revision it ended up having all of these other ways that it like intersected with themes in the book but I'm hesitant to sort of pick those all apart for you because I think it's

[00:43:38] More interesting for you all to do it kind of yourself. Good evening.

[00:43:43] I want to know what are some who are some of the authors or people that inspired you to become a writer. There are so many people I'm really I should probably write this question like on my hand because I always blink when people ask me

[00:43:58] Outside of sort of like my big people. But as soon as Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston I'm like Russians as Eudora Dostoyevsky I really like the work work of ever P. Jones who I feel like is sort of tragically underrated.

[00:44:19] He won a Pulitzer for a novel the known world in like 2005 and it was in Oprah's book club book which I thought meant that forever people would know you were. But but he also has two collections that are just really specific and like almost anthropological about just the lives of everyday people living in Washington D.C. I'm also a fan of James Baldwin and Zadie Smith. And Roberta bologna oh so many people I think I'm also a very even I went to graduate school. So it's not like I'm completely self-taught. But like I read books to figure out how they work. And so I can go like on a certain tear like if I'm trying to figure out how to manage or manage multiple people these are like a large cast and those would be the only books that I read.

[00:45:11] Where have you gotten your training.

[00:45:13] So I grew up here in Seattle Washington. I started off at Martin Luther King Elementary School from there. I met my tap mentor Dr. Darrell Smith who was born in Louisiana and she was my tap mentor. From there I met Christy Gray I ended up getting a scholarship to the dance Chance program and I ended up going to PNB. I was from there I met Tim Lynch my aunty right here. She

was a big influence in my life with continuously you know pushing us as you know making sure that you know us as kids of color having opportunities to be able to be in Seattle and to travel and to see the world when my tap teacher ended up passing away. It was my aunt who actually continued her vision and ended up opening a Northwest tap connection and we have now been running for 10 years now. So it just kind of shows you that when you have a vision and you're passionate about something that you never know what what what where that can take you so I mean I have a lot of people to truly thank for where I am today but I can definitely say family is definitely very important to me. What is your name and what is her name. I'm Alexander Jamal Jackson and this is Melba Iko.

[00:46:33] Thank you. Thank you.

[00:46:38] I think one more again I have two questions real quick ones. One how you pick the names and the characters. My name is Marlene and I hardly ever see it. And then the other what were you thinking in the

[00:46:50] Picture. What does it look like. I was thinking I wonder. Well if any of you turn the book over you'll see that this is just my signature face.

[00:47:03] These pictures are like two years apart and this is out of you know you sit for these kind of portraits and take photos and photos and photos and two different photographers shows the same face. So. What I was probably thinking is that this is the face that they're going to like. And so

[00:47:24] Having already had that experience I think I tried a lot of other ones and I realized well this is the one I bet.

[00:47:30] And it was as far as how I chose the names because I come from a really big family. The first thing was the names that people don't already have which was eliminated a lot of names. And then I tried to pick names that were sort of appropriate for generations which is why I like most of the 13 children have sort of

[00:47:54] I like to call like assimilation names. They're kind of like straightforward Anglo-Saxon names that can get them hired without any trouble. Somebody their resumé comes past somebody's desk with the exception of Layla which I imagine is she's like the last one. They decide to be a little bit more lyrical have a little bit more fun.

[00:48:14] And some of them are biblical like Jesse Yeah that's how all the names pretty much came to me in the book. Marlene I don't know it's hard to sort of go back and figure out certain names.

[00:48:28] I knew always when Layla's name was.

[00:48:32] And I always knew with Miles and Donald Miles and Duke's name where names were for sort of like obvious musical reasons and other people Cha I wanted to have the most sort of like no offense to the Charles is but I wanted him to have the most sort of boring name. But then I sort of

really like a really fun nickname that he doesn't tell everyone. Like he never tells Alice his nickname which is important to him because it's like a level of sort of trust and intimacy which is also I think similar to a lot of like family nicknames people have. You don't find out until you're like at their family gathering and you hear everyone call them and you're like Who even are you. I didn't know

[00:49:17] That this is what people were calling you.

[00:49:20] So yeah thank you so much.

[00:49:27] Angela and Melba and Alexander we now will have two more poems from northwest to African-American weight. I'm just messing it up as African-American writers alliance and I would love to welcome Lola Peters and Jay where. To the stage applause. Applause The title of my poem is Superman and bees in a place called home home is aware that

[00:50:03] Hard headed boy should have known better. That older wiser brother keeping watch over me. Born given mom fits six years before eyes lit out a Matchbox car collector a model airplane and cars similar it was that it was that same one the step dad of his second floor bedroom window onto the roof.

[00:50:38] With an all pink bath towel wrapped around his skinny neck for Kate inching closer to the edge ready to prove that he could lie to right to watch.

[00:50:55] Just in case even I knew for sure that he couldn't really fly. But there he was on the roof looking at lap chest puffed down one arm at an angle the other hand on his waist One

[00:51:19] Two.

[00:51:20] By the time he almost reached for he was eating grass ego and pride bruise to the bone Home is where big momma down the block was everybody's mom were all to me were they all to me.

[00:51:44] Theme lie every single Indian there was pregnant had their babies at home.

[00:51:54] Where we live next door to an elderly white couple with a model. A real model T Ford that he let me conquer they had honeybees in those honey bees were in hives in those honey bees pollinated our collards green beans.

[00:52:18] Where's Berry and strawberry bushes and rhubarb plant.

[00:52:23] Where oddly. Never got stung. Homes were acquired and mostly misunderstood Daddy faithfully attended church but was unfaithful to her who enjoyed lawns wailed show Bonanza and a heap of Variety Hour

[00:52:46] Where he learned the based Michelle's with homemade jar food carved totem poles animal figures and soften leather for purses and shoes for us that we never really appreciated Home is where diversity was it needed in our vocabulary hobo's hobo's.

[00:53:09] Fresh off the Pacific Northwest railway was stop at the front door for a cup of Folgers House coffee and we're Barnabas Collins looked in the shadows beetles crawled in the gardens and stopped hearts on the radio home. A once protective mesh from the horns of an active hive of backhoes bulldozers and drills buzzing around foundations Tariana tearing down excavating replacing digging for kryptonite to destroy familiar places called home. Thank you

[00:54:08] Location something the taste of honeysuckle in the air cadmium Scotch broom pollen adrift ruffles of swirling warm cool air something undulating sonic pulses red blue heat lightning flashes gurgles and splashes something pheromones all primal stomach churning insistent haunting unbidden something pushes through the casing of time beyond the boundaries of capacity over the limits of sense ability something whispers It's time.

[00:54:59] Flaps up a running start something urgent unfolds her model swings blows her out of sight into life's well-worn turbulence something unseen unspoken stamped beneath consciousness yearns to return. Are we the only species that can't seem to find their way to the quiet center.

[00:55:38] Thank you so much Lola and Jay.

[00:55:41] Well we have time for one more short reading from Angela every turn her dances and then we'll enjoy a final dance performance from Northwest hop connection Angela short when I'm very excited about the next performer every turn dances there truly Ain't no party like a Turner house party like a single celled organism it can change shape and reproduce itself with little fuel the food runs out by 9:00 p.m. no matter how much they make. But the booze never ends. The children in a pop and candy fuelled ecstasy will do doughnuts on their big wheels in the basement or minus miniature vehicles. They'll play video games on the old big screen down there standing up jostling one another fighting the big screen static and only stopping for Fager when pee breaks and the absence of any toys at all which is unlikely because church's basement doubles as a toy graveyard. Turner's under the age of 12 may resort to old school play linking arms and running as fast as they can in a circle until someone vomits playing tag in the dark until someone gets a minor concussion or simply screaming at the top of their prepubescent lungs until an adult comes down and threatens them into silence.

[00:56:58] The adults will play dominoes big wigs and Pokey. They will tell the same embarrassing stories about one another and guffaws if they're new they make liquor runs they make new boyfriends uncomfortable they make neighbors consider calling the police they will eventually kick the children out of the basement tuck them away upstairs and dance in the belly of Church's house to the classics from the disparate decades of their youth. Every Turner dances two left feet or no. Even Russell Oh by nature floated and swung to the right combination of 70s soul and egging on. They hustled Leyland her sisters spent three songs breaking down the moves for their nieces and finally on the

fourth it came together. Merkel taps and steps and pauses and turns finished. It might have been but George's basement never lost its earthy cave like essence the warmth of bodies made the lonely smell rise and it felt like dancing in a bunker made of earth thank you.

[00:58:20] I said to him half the baby it to the hip hip hop you don't stop your rockets at the baby. You say up jumped the boogie to the rhythm of love. Now what you is to stop rapping to be with me and your people we gonna try to feed. You see I have a child that God and like might say hello to the black to the White the red and the brown the purple and yellow the first. Bang bang up gets a little bit dizzy just look at the bang bang put you in this rock you don't stop got the rhythm that'll make your body rock at this point you heard muffled somewhat I come to a song and make every heavy weight that you came here would have to get shape you know ya

[00:59:04] I'm so unique come the game on the priest and the one I see you want a song you one to step to me. How about the how shall blossom in his teeth. Now they call me your head and my prayers and you can guess by now that I'm a church girl Madonna and the princess wait for the little guy to ring the same that would have been my day but let's get right to the weather look I go back to town you don't stop let me go change drop now so far not come again a happy day will not be it my step out of the water stop me on my way you say hey fly you're all I've got to fly you but I couldn't make it go show me how my amateur recorder reported try to get known around the globe I a no that a slip up.

[00:59:47] So what's up so what percent are under way. The first thing she asked me right out the gate started out with some signs I started looking at the camisole the cap was so obvious she was writing notes and on paper I said it was shown that she said the future but she looked more like the vapors I said she we some the road breaks and I'm I have to catch you late term because everything about Joe creamy swag is telling me that you rub it oh hater see spicy sweet man I love my kids I keep a dance muffin glad

[01:00:21] Thank you so much to Northwest tap connection thanks to all of you for being here tonight thank you to the African-American writers Lyons to Georgia McDade Lola Peters Jay where Nakia Isabel and Minnie Collins thanks to Melba IKO and Alexander Jackson and thank you to our community partners Langston Northwest African-American museum the black heritage society of Washington and Elliott Bay Book Company and a big thank you to Vivian Phillips. Thank you all so much for being here. Until next year.

[01:00:58] 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.