



Library podcast

Tom Perrotta discusses "Mrs. Fletcher"

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[00:00:35] Good evening I'm Stesha Brandon and I'm the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at Seattle Public Library and it's my delight to welcome you here to Central Library tonight to see Tom Perrotta discuss his new novel Mrs. Fletcher. Thank you to Elliott Bay Book Company for copresenting the event tonight. We would like to thank the Seattle Times for their generous promotional support for library programs. We're also grateful. Oh wait is Nicole in here. I don't I don't see her. We'd also like to thank our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and finally a big thank you to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. It is now my pleasure to welcome Karen Maeda Allman from Elliott Bay Book Company who will introduce Tom Perrotta.

[00:01:25] Good evening and thank you for joining us tonight. And I just want to start out with a thank you again to The Seattle Times for their book coverage and more where McDonald's here tonight. And also Nicole Broder and I. If you're like me you're looking obsessively every Friday for the listings and every Sunday for the reviews the wonderful interviews including one with Tom Perrotta and also the Live Life column. And if you're not already a subscriber or if you don't don't take a look online I recommend that you do. You can also access via their their phone app which is how I often am reading those kind of on the fly but I just wanted to call you out and say very sincerely thank you so much. So. So Tom Perrotta is the best selling author of nine books and he has read with us at Elliot Bay a number of times and this time we thought maybe we would kind of share the wealth with the Greater Seattle community by inviting him to come and be part of this library space. He has written both short story collections and novels. His books include little children for which he wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation and he was nominated for an Academy Award for this work. He is also the author author of The Abstinence Teacher nine inches and most recently The Leftovers a 2011 New York Times notable book a best seller for us certainly. And this book appeared on many best books list that year GQ NPR's Fresh Air.

[00:03:10] Washington Post Seattle Times. And then it was adapted and Tom Perrotta was very much part of that adapted into a PBS Peabody award winning HBO series that ran for three seasons. His work has been featured in the Boston's One Book One City program and he's also been featured in

The New York Times by the book series. Tonight he's here to read from and speak about his new novel Mrs. Fletcher which just received a lovely front cover review in The New York Times Book Review. I think it's a perfect summer book. It's a mother son story that lives continues to live with you. They're two people struggling to deal with things that I think a lot of us deal with but maybe not quite to that degree a home. And. And I think that fit it's a story that really resonated for me and what a wonderful book to read this summer which I don't know about the rest here but it's been kind of a trying and terrible time. And to be able to escape into this beautiful story which also has some really deep truth to share with us about human nature about relationships and about the forces that shape us. So Tom Perrotta will read. He'll speak. He'll take some questions from the audience about this book about other books. And so again thank you for coming to Seattle Public Library tonight and please join me in welcoming Tom Perrotta

[00:04:47] Hi. Thanks so much. Thanks so much for coming and. Supporting the library which is such a beautiful place. Really. Every time I'm in Seattle I make sure to come here just because it's. I don't if there's a nicer one in the whole country. I mean it really is. A great place. So I've read a little bit from Mrs. Fletcher and then what I really would love to do is just. Have a conversation with you. So. One thing I'll say is that the book is set in 2014. And I thought that I was being kind of. Up to the minute and really engaging with a lot of issues that were at the forefront of the national conversation at the time. And you know we had a lot of problems in 2014 but we also had a president who was. Competent intelligent. And a decent human being rather than a neo-Nazi apologist. And as a result the book has taken on this air for me off like premature nostalgia. It's just three years ago but it seem to take place in a better world. So I just felt I needed to say that this week because. It's been a shocking week. So as we said earlier Mrs. Fletcher is about a mother and a son and. Eve Fletcher the title character is a 46 year old woman. Who's divorced and she has one son. And in the first chapter she brings her son to college.

[00:06:26] And she comes home and has to decide. Who she is now that she's no longer a mom. And the book is really about how she goes about. Creating a new identity for herself and. She does it in a kind of. Accidental unorthodox way. And her son is also trying to find a new identity and is maybe a little less successful. But they're also surrounded by a bunch of other characters whose lives I go into and I just want to read to you a couple scenes about a woman named Amanda. She's the events coordinator at the senior center that Eve directs. Some and read this to Amanda sections and then we'll talk. To Bikram instructor that night was Jo Jo. Not Amanda's favorite. She would have preferred Kendra the soulful slightly overweight woman who read inspirational meditations about self acceptance. During Sebastian at the beginning and end of. Class. Kendra roamed the studio like a benign spirit. The goddess of encouragement. Always ready with a supportive comment. Sometimes that was all you needed. A trinket of praise to get you through the most brutal poses. The ones that made you hate your body and wonder why you even bothered. Let's go people. Jo Jo clapped his hands as if summoning a dog. Where's the energy. There's no such thing as halfway in Bikram. Jo Jo was a beautiful Asian man

[00:08:03] With the body of a gymnast and the soul of a drill sergeant. His adjustments were rare and brusque and sometimes borderline inappropriate as if his lack of sexual interest in women gave him

license to touch them wherever and however he pleased. Even so. Amanda knew that complaining about Jo Jo was pure luxury like whining about the prices at Whole Foods. The real miracle was that anybody taught Bikram Yoga in Harrington. Ten years ago when she'd left for Sarah Lawrence. There hadn't been a single yoga studio in her hometown. Now there were three as well as across fit gym a decent vegan restaurant and a tattoo parlour whose owner had a degree from Rizzi. Without realizing it. She'd been part of a hipster reverse migration. Legions of overeducated underpaid 20 somethings getting squeezed out of the city. Spreading beyond the pricey inner suburbs to the more affordable outposts like Harrington. Transforming the places they'd once fled. Making them livable again. Or at least tolerable. Another reason for gratitude. Joe Joe's classes were more sparsely attended than Kendra's. So she had some room to spread out. No worries about her personal space getting invaded by a rude neighbour. Or slipping on a puddle of fresh squeezed man's sweat. She hated to be sexist but it was undeniable. Men were gross at Bikram. Everybody perspire. But certain guys took it to a freakish extreme. Dripping like faucets through the entire 90 minutes of class. The foam of their mats squishing underfoot. Tonight there were only five males in the class. None of them familiar thank God. A couple of weeks ago she found herself standing one row behind a guy she'd hooked up with on Tinder.

[00:10:08] A 42 year old graphic artist named Del with long graying hair and a sad little belly bulging over the waistband of his speedo. Their eyes had met in the front mirror and he'd smiled and happy surprise. She was aware of his scrutiny throughout all 26 postures. And it had completely ruined her concentration. And then he tried to chatter up in the parking lot. As if they were old pals. Rather than strangers who'd fucked once. Just because they both happen to be bored and lonely at the same time. She wasn't sure why the encounter had unnerved her so much. Dell was a pretty nice guy. They'd actually done okay in bed together. And she was 99 percent sure his presence at the studio was pure coincidence. And not the beginning of a stalking nightmare. But it didn't matter. It was just creepy to see him there totally out of context as if he were an actual human being rather than a figment of her sexual imagination. She went home that night and deleted her Tinder account. So nothing like that would ever happen again. At the senior center. Amanda's tattoos were a constant source of friction with the clients. And apparently an open invitation to criticism. Like one of those bumper stickers that read has my driving. She wished she could have supplied a toll free number so the irate old folks. Could call at their leisure and leave a message. Instead of accosting her in the crafts room. To inform her that she'd made a terrible mistake. That she could have been a pretty girl

[00:11:55] And what the heck was she thinking. At least wear some long sleeves. The sweet old ladies told her. A turtleneck and some dark tights. Might not be such a bad idea either. Something subtler and far more frustrating went on in the room changing room. Where a number of the younger women had tattoos of their own. Though of a more decorous suburban variety. At dolphin on the shoulder blade a constellation of three or four stars around an ankle

[00:12:27] A cheerful little bird on the name of the neck. The first time Amanda undressed there she felt a sudden chill of separation. Her own more drastic aesthetic. Marking her as an instant outsider. The bad ass chick with the cobra wrapped around her leg. The hand grenade on her breast. The Anarchist bomb on her thigh. And the meat cleaver. The only one she truly regretted.

[00:12:59] Dripping blood on her upper arm. She tried to compensate by being extra friendly smiling at everyone she passed

[00:13:09] But the others rarely smiled back. Most of them avoided eye contact altogether. Five years ago. When she'd been living in Brooklyn with Blake. She would have enjoyed this outcast feeling

[00:13:23] The knowledge that she was a little too edgy for the yoga moms and single ladies of Harrington. But she wasn't that person anymore. She was lonely and looking for new friends. And it broke her heart a little every time she showered and changed without exchanging a single pleasant word or sympathetic look with anyone she'd gotten so used to being ignored. She wasn't sure what to think when she emerged from the shower. A much too skimpy towel wrapped around her torso. And noticed a slender pretty woman staring at her with a quizzical expression. Amanda had never seen this woman at Bikram before. But she'd been aware of her throughout the class. Was hard not to be. She was one of those front row yoga goddesses. And visibly fit and limber. Observing yourself in the mirror with an air of scientific detachment as she tied herself in elegant knots. Barely breaking a sweat. It was a cramped space. A single wooden bench set between two rows of lockers. With several women milling about in various states of undress. Trying not to get in one another's way. Amanda had just released the towel. When she sensed a presence at her side. Excuse me. The woman's voice was surprisingly casual. Considering that Amanda was naked and she herself was wearing nothing but yoga pants. I think we know each other.

[00:14:55] The stranger was even prettier up close with black pixie cut hair and blue eyes that seemed pale and bright at the same time. You went to Harrington. She continued. We were in AP English senior year. Her voice sounded vaguely familiar. But Amanda searched in vain for a name to connect to the face. It didn't help that she was distracted by the woman's breasts which were small and pert with optimistic upturned nipples. She couldn't help wondering what that would feel like. Having boobs that defied gravity. And her stomach so flat. It might actually be concave.

[00:15:36] She glanced with longing at her own discarded towel lying uselessly on the floor. I'm sorry Amanda said your name is. Beckett. After an awkward moment of silence the women smiled. Realizing her error. In high school I met by Tricia. Tricia Lozano. Holy shit. Amanda thought Tricia Lozano. She could see it now. That goes to the girl she'd known hidden inside a whole new person. I didn't recognize you she said. You were blonde back then. Of course I was. Trish shook her head. I was such a cliché. The cute little cheerleader from hell. Amanda wasn't sure how to respond. She'd never thought of Tricia Lozano as a cliché. She was more like the platonic ideal of an American high school girl. Pretty and bubbly and super popular always at the center of the action and she'd been smart too which seemed even more unfair. Your name's Beckett now.

[00:16:45] I changed it in college. I got into acting and Tricia just seemed so blah. We were doing this all female production of Waiting for Godot and I don't know. Becca it just seemed like a cool name. Tricia rolled her eyes amused by her younger more pretentious self. Turns out I'm a terrible actor. So the joke was on me but I kept the name. It's a big improvement. Amanda could feel herself nodding a

little too emphatically. As if she were receiving news of profound importance and it made her queasy to think of what she must look like. Plump and flushed and naked listening so intently to a beautiful bare breasted woman who called herself Beckett.

[00:17:29] You look great Tricia said touching her gently on the arm. Are you still living here. It's just temporary. Amanda's face warmed with embarrassment. Was living it with my boyfriend in Brooklyn but. It was a long story. Not one she wanted to go into. Just then. She turned toward the open locker rifling through her clothes until she found her bra. What about you. Visiting my Mom. Trish made a sour face as if this were an unpleasant obligation. Like jury duty. I live in L.A. now. I went out there for film school and never looked back. My fiance's a DP You know a cinematographer. So I think we're pretty much stuck there. In voluntarily Amanda's gaze strayed to Tricia's left hand. The small diamond gleaming tastefully not the least bit boastful or obnoxious.

[00:18:29] Wow. Amanda hooked her bra then gave the underwire is a little tug getting everything in alignment. That's exciting. She grabbed her panties. They were black and high waisted with stretchy lace panels on the sides and pulled them on. She felt a little better now that she was decent. Glad it was a good underwear day. Do you work in the movie business too. I was a P.A. for a while but now I teach at Soul Cycle. Probably do it for a few more years to get ready to start a family. Shrugged not unhappily. You. Single Amanda said trying to sound matter of fact. Just getting my life in order. I'm the events coordinator at the senior center. They actually have a pretty good lecture series. Tricia nodded. But there was a faraway look in her eyes. As if she weren't really listening. This is so weird she said. I still think about you sometimes. Me. Amanda gave a puzzled laugh. She and Trish had barely exchanged two words in high school. Why. To be honest Trish said you kind of freaked me out. You're always staring at me like I was this horrible stuck up shallow person and I couldn't understand why you hated me so much. I didn't hate you Amanda said. I didn't even know you. It's okay. Trish told her. I had this epiphany in college. It just hit me one day like. Fuck. I was a mean girl. That's why she hated me. Sometimes even now I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm just ashamed of the way I treated people

[00:20:16] How selfish I was such a little princess. So when I saw you here. I just thought I should come over and apologize. Make things right. You don't need to apologize. I am so sorry. Trish said. And the next thing Amanda knew they were hugging Tricia's proud little cheerleader boobs mashing into her chest. I am really and truly sorry for the person I used to be. Not

[00:20:44] Yet. Sorry. I just needed to say. There's more to this story. I think

[00:20:49] I'd miss my chance for the good segway. It only took a minute for Amanda to reactivate her Tinder account.

[00:21:01] Her old matches were gone but she didn't care about that. She has the same photos as before and stuck where their tried and true tag line. If you're nice I'll show you my other ones. She set the match distance for 15 miles in the age range for 35 to 55. That was the key in her experience. The older guys were out there checking their phones every two minutes just itching to be called out of

retirement. And they'd happily drive through a blizzard with a flat tire. If a woman in her 20s was waiting on the other end. Amanda understood this was a bad idea. Not to mention a blatant violation of a recently instituted no hookup policy. Tinder was like tequila. Fun today said tomorrow. But sometimes you didn't have a choice. That unexpected reunion with Tricia Lozano had really messed with her self-esteem. Thought of going home and eating a salad in front of the TV had triggered a wave of self-pity that bordered on rage. That's the highlight of my day. A fucking salad. It would have been fine

[00:22:12] Or at least marginally tolerable if Tricia had still been trash a grown up version of her teenage self. Cute and predictable. Flaunting attack Iraq. Bragging about her frat boy stockbroker boyfriend. At least that way Amanda would have preserved her sense of intellectual superiority. The illusion that she was an adventurous bohemian who'd chosen the road less traveled. Patricia Beckett was a completely new person living the kind of life Amanda had always imagined for herself. My fiancée is a cinematographer. How the fuck did that happen. It just seems so unfair. The girl who'd been deliriously happy in high school was the one who'd reinvented herself. Moving to a glamorous city and falling in love with an artist who loved her back. While Amanda who dreamed of nothing but escape. Had ended up right back where she started. With only a few stupid tattoos to show for all her trouble. I worked at the senior center. They have a pretty good lecture series. She felt so stupid saying that she'd wanted to die. And then Tricia had the gall to hugger to fucking apologize for her happiness which was way worse than bragging about it. I am so getting laid tonight. Amanda. Before they'd even let go of each other. Her match arrived in less than an hour knocking furtively on the front door. She studied him through the peephole.

[00:23:47] Amazed as always that this was even possible. That you could swipe at a photo of a stranger in the flesh and blood person would show up on your doorstep. This one was a little heavier than she'd expected. He claimed to be an avid cyclist. But he bore an otherwise reassuring resemblance to his profile pic. His name was Bobby. And he seemed charmingly ill at ease in the living room like a teenager picking up his prom date. He wanted to know if it was all right to keep his shoes on. And ask permission before sitting down on the couch. He said no to our offer of a beer then changed his mind a few seconds later but only if it wasn't too much trouble. Middle aged men were often like this. Tentative and overly polite. The guys her own age had more of a swagger. As if they were stopping by to pick up a well-deserved award. How was traffic. She asked. Piece of cake he said. Well thanks for making the trip. Thanks for hosting. He surveyed the decor with a skeptical expression taking in the matching Gray furniture the gas fireplace. The daisies and baskets full of dried flowers. This year place. I'm house sitting. My parents are on a cruise. They're coming home tomorrow. This was the lie she always told. Because she didn't want any tender dudes ringing the doorbell at 2:00 in the morning drunk and looking for company.

[00:25:21] Besides. The real story was too complicated. Her mother's unexpected death from a heart attack at the age of 62 her own returned from the city to make the funeral arrangements and deal with the legal and financial crap. She was the only child of divorced parents so it was all on her. And the fact that she just stayed. His life in the city had gotten complicated. She'd broken up with her boyfriend and was living in a temporary sublet. And here was a whole house that suddenly belonged

to her. She couldn't bear to redecorate or even clean out her mother's closet. Some point if the opportunity arose. She'd tell Bobby that her dad was a retired cop. Also not true. But certain precautions were advisable. If you're going to invite strangers into your home and have sex with them. I went on a cruise once he said. Wasn't that great. You couldn't pay me enough. She told him. When he finished his beer they went out on the back deck to smoke the joint she'd asked him to bring. She wasn't a big pothead but we'd worked faster than alcohol. And had the added benefit of making everything seem a little more unreal a lot funnier than it would have been otherwise.

[00:26:39] Which was definitely helpful in a situation like this. Nice night he said nodding at the sky. Moon is almost full. Amanda didn't reply. She wanted to keep the small talk to a minimum. That had been her mistake with Dale. They talked for an hour before taking their clothes off. And it ended up feeling a little too much like a real date. Which is probably what caused all the confusion when they ran into each other at yoga class. I'm divorced he said. In case you were wondering. I wasn't. At least you could take a hint. They smoked the rest of the joint in a strangely comfortable silence. As if they'd known each other a long time. And had exhausted every possible topic of conversation. For a moment. It coincided with the realization that she was very high. She imagined they were a married couple. Committed to spending every remaining night of their lives together. Until one of them got sick and died. Me and Bobby she thought. Bobby and me. It was a ridiculous idea. But just plausible enough to make her laugh. What's so funny. Nothing. She shook her head as if it wasn't worth explaining. It's stupid. You have a nice laugh. He told her. Then went back inside into her childhood bedroom. He sat on the edge of her narrow bed and watched her undress.

[00:28:14] She made a little strip tease out of it. Undoing the buttons on her dress one by one. Very slowly. He was a good audience. Oh yeah. He said more than once. You are so gorgeous. The dress fell to the floor. She stood there a moment in her black bra and panties along with a knee high boots. She tugged on for the occasion. He nodded for quite a while. As if something he'd long suspected had turned out to be true. You're killing me he said. You're totally fucking killing me. As far back as she could remember Amanda had had mixed feelings about her body. She was shorter and heavier than she wanted to be. With big full breasts that weren't great for yoga or running but made a very positive impression. In a situation like this. Oh Jesus he muttered as she dropped her bra on top of the dress. Look at those tits. Standing next to Tricia Lozano in the harsh light of the changing room. Amanda had felt all the way felt the way she had all through high school. Chubby and dull and hopeless. But right now. Shimmying out of her panties and the trembling yellow light. With Bobby studying her like a painting in a museum. She felt like something special. Want me to keep the boots on. Whatever's easier he told her.

[00:29:42] I'm good either way. Now I'm

[00:29:49] Thank you so much. So if you ask questions I'll repeat them so everyone can hear. And then I will. Do my best to. Respond. Anybody want to start. Yes. Nicole. Yeah. OK. Yes. So the question is how. The book sort of expanded. Because I started. Thinking I was just going to write about Mrs. Fletcher. I thought I was going to write a short kind of. Intense novel about which is the story of even the book. She's that comes home. To the empty nest and. It ends up. Finding herself

[00:30:33] Repeatedly going to this porn site that features middle aged women. She does it because she receives an anonymous dirty text calling her a MILF and she's not sure what the word means and she Googles it and it leads her to this site where all these women are sharing their sex lives with the world and

[00:30:55] It happens at a moment when Eve is feeling like her own sexual identity has disappeared. And it's sort of

[00:31:05] Inspiring in some weird way to know that she's a milf that she is. She still has it in some way. And she kind of tries on this identity like oh I'm not just. You know. A mom who's kind of lonely I'm a MILF.

[00:31:24] And as soon as she does the world starts to look different to her it sort of gets this erotic charge that because she's seen all these scenarios in the porn too. And so suddenly these other erotic possibilities reveal themselves. And this was my idea that was gonna be the whole book. But in the first chapter Eve takes her son to school. And I got very interested in him. And instead of writing Chapter Two of each story I said that I want to know what the son's doing at school. And I wrote his story. He meets a girl at school. I said I want to know her story. Eve is working with Amanda. And I realized that. You know something was going to happen between them and I wanted to know who she was. And this is basically the. You know what I was trying to do is write against my own inclination which is always to have a. Kind of a large cast of characters and to switch points of view. But I couldn't conquer those inclinations they you know it just it's one of those things as you write more books and get older it's either you. Embrace the idea that you are who you are as a writer or you even when I try to shake things up my books come out like my books that they will say the leftovers was to me a real that was the real aberrant anomaly in my career just because it borrowed from science fiction or speculative dystopian fiction. It had this big premise that was. Counterfactual so that was a big change and this felt a little bit more like

[00:32:58] Kind of reclaiming the identity I'd had but before that.

[00:33:03] Yes. Yeah. Yeah. So the question is that the book has a lot of discussion of gender and if you recall 2014 had a lot of discussion about gender it was around that moment. Maybe like a year or two before what had been like a very academic discourse you know kind of gender studies discourse suddenly made its way into the world. I remember I was having a talk with a friend of mine who was in divinity school. She came up to Harvard to do a postgraduate year and I was asking her about it and she said. Well you know we barely studied. Whenever I can remember what class it was we should we barely studied anything. We just ended up talking about gender all summer and it was the first time I even heard the word cis gender and it was and she said you know we had there were people who had many people like you know pronouns that they needed to be addressed by. It was the first time all these phenomena that have now become kind of staples of certainly college culture. But I think now mainstream culture as well in the first time I became aware of them and that was that was

part of it. And you know Brendan's going off to college and then Eve takes a college class on gender and society taught by a transgender teacher and you know these.

[00:34:36] These issues are in the background to this story but each story is also a story about identity. It's you know the MILF is this sort of sex identity that that she borrows. It's not something that comes from her. It's imposed on her. By this text but also by that culture of porn which just as this is one available identity. But she's searching for an identity and she takes it. So I feel like all these things are kind of clustered together. Though you know. It's sort of my instinct as a writer not to go directly at the issue. So that would be like to write that in the end the trans character is actually very important in the book and we get to know her pretty well I think. But. You know. It's sort of more interesting to me to talk about identity. In this sort of comic way and then get a lot of voices kind of going at once and I really felt like. The book was about all sorts of characters. Going through the experience that a lot of us went through in those years of like being confronted with this new set of ideas. That

[00:36:00] Depending upon your age either seem quite obvious or you know really disorienting and not just age right. All sorts of other reasons. And. Because I didn't feel like that. It's obviously it's very important to understand the experience of. People you know trans people. But it's also important I understand the social context in which. You know people who haven't had to think about gender identity in this way are coming to terms with it in the same way that you know to talk about race and we have to talk about. The entire community and all of the struggles that people have. Understanding. You know their own privilege or you know where where they stand in. The in the big picture. So the idea is that that is really about. The reaction of people. To. Learning or resisting. These these new ideas and people are experiencing. Identity and sex and and in a number of ways. So it's funny how kind of. You know really good to start with this comic. Premise about porn. But. It. Then started. Interacting with these. Bigger more you know obviously important social issues. Yes. Yeah. So you know Eve

[00:37:35] Eve is in a close. Oh yeah. So the question was why is Brendan. Why are his sections told in first person. So every other character in the book is described the way Amanda was in the section I read close third person. And I don't know what it was when I went to Brendan. I thought first of all he's kind of a jerk. I was a little worried about trying to get in his head cause I thought that may not be a lot going on there. But I also thought oh I can hear him and he's sort of funny. There's something funny about. How limited his. Grasp of. The world is and how self-centered he is and how in some ways innocent he is and scared he is and I felt like. I could just hear him and as a writer I thought let's just try that. When I step back and look at it I think what it really does is create this. Is

[00:38:36] Just a jarring transition for the reader every time you switch from Eve or anybody else in the third person to Brendan. His voice is so strong and can be a little bit grating I think. But it you know again the book is about it's just about this family that has a mother and a son. But you get a sense reading it that their worlds are. Incredibly separate. That they don't overlap very much and you feel it in the writing I think. How how separate they are. And I do think that microcosm is at least in some ways representative for the country. You know it's. In many ways. You know. People's even

people are very in very close proximity or not sharing the same reality. And and the question very specifically I think is how does this feminist mother. Get this. Son who seems just very comfortable with. This sort of male privilege that the mom doesn't approve of and can he change. You know it becomes really the question for for the book. So. You know just as a writer I thought the first person felt right to me and so I did it. But now I can see that it was. It felt right because I think it has a certain effect. It was a question. Mm hmm. Yes the question is the difference between novel writing and screenwriting to there. One thing I'll say is. That when I wrote this script for little children I wrote it with the director Todd Field

[00:40:22] And that was a very collaborative experience. But it was just the two of us and when we're done with the script my work was done. You know that how that's how. That feature screenwriting works. But with the leftovers. That is a truly collaborative. Experience that. Extends into production editing it so that the writer the writer's room is really the center of a TV show and there were seven or eight people in the room the showrunner was Damon Lindelof who did lost and he's just a brilliant writer and very bold creative personality. But one thing Damon insisted on in the writers room was that we broke. Every scene and most of the time every line of dialogue in the room. So we had to have seven or eight people reaching consensus. So other shows sometimes worked very differently like they'll make an outline and then the individual writer will take it home and fill in the outline. But we we just went at it in this incredibly grueling kind of detail oriented way so that when you took an outline home to write you actually had

[00:41:40] You know 75 or 80 percent of the script already there. You know it would change but but. We just broke it in great detail. What that means is that it's so different from novel writing where you're alone and you're making all the decisions and you don't need anyone's approval but you don't have anyone's help. So you know to me I feel like I was a

[00:42:05] You know a solo performer and then I joined a band. And you know the sound we made was it was really big and it was exciting. But. We also had to like spend time in the band and. Got to know each other like a little too well and certain people got on your nerves that you know it's like it was all that. And it certainly taught me a great lesson about collaboration which is

[00:42:35] That the tension was was very productive like it was hard especially the first season when we were using the book.

[00:42:44] You know I was having to cede my control. I was trying not to be defensive trying to be productive collaborator but nonetheless I sometimes give you my feelings got hurt or I lost certain battles and you know they were they were rough days and then. We got through the first season and then if you watch the leftovers you can kind of see it on the screen like. We took us a while to find the voice of the show. But we found it I think in the second half of the first season then we got back for season two. I sort of understood my role. Damon and I really trusted each other. We had a great team of writers and it started to. It got easier and it got more fun. And that continued into into the third season. But. I was also writing this book at the same time so be out there working out in L.A. working on the scripts and then coming home and trying to write the book. And it's just I had two entirely

separate lives that were separate geographically and they were separate creatively and I had to make that transition repeatedly and it was a it was a difficult experience. And in fact. I had a deadline for this book and we got called back for season three before I expected it. And I ended up having to. You know write write the book while I was working on the show. You know I'd work on the show all week and I'd work all weekend on the book. And we finished both in October. I finished the book and the show ended in October and I haven't done anything since I've just still

[00:44:30] I'm still recovering from from that experience.

[00:44:33] But you're now very nostalgic about the writers room and feel like it would be great. Whenever I write a novel to have like seven people in a room nearby who can give me the good lines

[00:44:49] Any any other questions. Yes. No thanks. That's interesting. So she was just. Saying. That

[00:45:00] You know she didn't know I had written the book. She would think that maybe a woman had written it which I think is very high praise. And B my acknowledgments are full of women. Partly because. Interestingly publishing is just the. At least my experience might my agent or my entire career is a woman. All my editors have been women. You know but I also thank my wife and my daughter. In the acknowledgments. I wouldn't say any of those people were models. For the characters. They were people who helped me

[00:45:42] Write and publish the book or made my life better at home.

[00:45:50] But I have been writing about women for I would say like that for the first half of my career I was very much considered like a guy writer my first book Bad haircut is about male friendship. And I wrote a book called the wishbone about a wedding band that. These male rock musicians. But I'd say the second half has been very heavily. Weighted toward stories of women so like little children Abstinence Teacher and Mrs. Fletcher I think are part of a. Group. About women of my generation who are. You know what I'm really interested in women of my generation because they were the first ones to grow up. In. I would say it wasn't a feminist culture but it was a culture that accepted the feminist narrative in a way that it hadn't before. So. When a lot of women I knew in college they really felt like OK. I can have the career that I want to have I can have the family I want to have. Nobody had really tried it yet. And you know they've discovered. That some some of them have discovered it's possible to do that some of them would just have decided it wasn't possible. Some of them. Are. You know found that. There was tension between the different identities that they were trying to live in so each of these stories is really. Looking at. You just in some broad sense like women that I have known but I didn't I didn't never really have like. An individual person. In mind. The characters always sort of. Come out in the writing. I don't have much I usually have a situation but not a character in the character is produced

[00:47:50] In the writing. Okay. One more question.

[00:47:54] Oh yes. Well that's that sounds like a much more purposeful. Okay. The question was. Yeah how did how did election go from being a book I couldn't publish to being a film and you know it really is. To me it's like the little Cinderella story that I got to live

[00:48:19] Because I don't know that I'd be here tonight if that hadn't happened. I had written and published a. Bad haircut. And. Actually at the time I had written. Three. There was a period where I had written three books this book that remains unpublished bad haircut and election and none of them were were published. And. You know it's easy to lose faith in yourself if. You do this work and you feel it's the best you can do. And I you know I thought. Boy these are pretty good books. And I just couldn't break through. And then. In 1994 a very small press picked up my story collection a bad haircut. And so I finally was a published writer and thought oh maybe I can get a job teaching at a college. But election had been written in 93 and it was sitting in my house. I submitted it to my agent my then agent and she said she had submitted it doesn't publishers and they all said

[00:49:30] This is interesting but it feels like a young adult novel except there's too much sex. And at that time there was a very strict division between why a and adult work. Now it's a little fuzzier now. And there's why I is able to do a lot more. But she just said I don't think I can publish this book. And so I put it in the drawer and I started working on the wishbone. The book about the. Rock musicians are playing a wedding band. And I was reading from that at a writer's conference and a screenwriter was in the audience and she said oh this idea that that book

[00:50:11] Feels like a movie. The chapter you read feels like a movie. And I had these friends who are independent producers and you should get in touch with them. Or actually she she told them to call me. So these guys called me and I said Look I'm not done with the wishbone is when I am done I would love to get it to you. But I had the wherewithal to just say but you know I have this unpublished book about a high school election. And I think it's pretty good. You want to take a look and say but I said it very sheepishly because for me it was a failure but they didn't treated that way. They're like nobody else has seen it you know. So for them it was this exclusive look at you know a never before public published book. And I sent it to them and they really liked it. Now this also again these things happen in ways that are mysterious 1999 when film historians go like this. That was the year of the teen movie. Was there's all these movies came out. You know 10 Things I Hate About You was that I don't have Heathers came out that year but there all these sort of teen movies that it was just a really viable genre.

[00:51:20] At the time. And. So they looked at that. The mix of what publishers couldn't deal with and said that's that sounds good. MTV Films and just started up. And these producers had seen Citizen Ruth Alexander Payne's movie at Sundance and like he would be great for this. And so. All of a sudden this book there was a failure was optioned and was given to this hot young director who loved it. And then he and his partner wrote this amazing script and there was this young woman that people had heart. You know there's some buzz around this Reese Witherspoon it all just happened really fast and. My publisher then got wind of the fact that the movie was being made and the book got into the pipeline and it barely beat the movie as a result of that but it just went from being this thing that just

was dead to having this sort of charmed life and then it became this movie that people still talk about you know all these years later. So. It was just a kind of an amazing experience for me

[00:52:30] I guess. I guess that's it. But thank you so much for coming. In.

[00:52:37] 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.