



Library podcast

Claire Messud discusses "The Burning Girl"

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[00:00:36] Hi everybody I'm Stesha Brandon and I am the Literature and Humanities Program Manager here at The Seattle Public Library and I want to begin tonight's program by acknowledging like we do at most of our programs that we are on Duwamish land. Thank you to our author series sponsor Gary Kunis and to the Seattle Times for generous promotional support of library programs. Thank you as well to our program partner or university bookstore. Finally we are grateful to The Seattle Public Library Foundation private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors helped to provide free programs and services that touched the lives of everyone in our community. So to library foundation donors here with us tonight we say thank you very much for your support.

[00:01:20] So tonight we're going to have Miss Messud read and talk a little bit about her new book. And then afterwards she'll be taking your questions. And then after the Cuban eight she'll be signing books right over here. Now I am delighted to introduce Claire Messud. Miss Messud is a recipient of the Guggenheim and Radcliffe fellowships and the Strauss living award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is the author of five previous works of fiction including the bestseller *The Emperor's Children* and *the one upstairs*. She's here tonight to talk about her most recent novel *The Burning Girl* which is a deceptively simple tale of a friendship between two girls Julia and Cassie and a piercing story of adolescence and identity. *Publisher's Weekly* says of *The Burning Girl* Messud shines a tender gaze on her protagonists and sustains an elegiac tone as she conveys the volatile emotions of adolescent behavior and the dawning of female vulnerability informed by the same sophisticated intelligence and elegant prose as *the woman upstairs* but gaining new poignant depths. This novel is haunting and emotionally gripping.

[00:02:31] Please help me welcome Claire Messud.

[00:02:41] Thank you everybody. It's wonderful to be here. And now you will never be allowed to leave. It's a

[00:02:49] It's a. Well that's. What happens now. What happens now. Oh

[00:02:57] It's it's super to be here. Thank you and thank you for that lovely introduction.

[00:03:03] So I thought what I would do is is some combination of of reading a little bit and telling you a little bit about this book and why I wrote it. Well I thought I wrote it. The Burning Girl is is a novel about the the unraveling really of the lifelong short life long friendship between two girls.

[00:03:29] The narrator Julia tells the story from this from it's just when she's telling it's the summer just before 7 before senior year. But she's she's recalling incidents that start in the summer after between sixth and seventh grade and and that end at the end of ninth grade. The story is set in a fictional town in Massachusetts that is that is in between. That is north of Boston between Boston and the. And the New Hampshire border. In the end the book is divided into three sections the first section. It is entirely that summer. It's a time when the two girls the two girls who've been friends since forever are are sort of idling the summer away and spend time. They go into the woods where there's a quarry and an abandoned asylum and they have a bunch they have well they have adventures. I don't know anyway. And then the second section which I think of as time passes it covers the span between seventh and eighth and ninth grades in the third section takes place in ninth grade by which time the girl's friendship has has they've drifted apart quite a bit. So why this book now people ask and you know I'm obviously not a

[00:04:57] Teenager myself. And the answer is I mean you know for a long time I would say that every time I wrote a book it was like it was sort of like being a magpie I would take one thing from here and one thing from there. But I I think actually it's more apt to say it's like composting and you take you know the egg shells and that and the coffee grounds and the potato peelings and you hope that something will grow. You hope that something organic will come out of putting these things together. So the short answer to why now is is that I am the mother of two teenagers and the aunt to several more. I mean some of them no longer teenagers but that it means that for them for the last sort of seven or eight years possibly longer I've been witness to the travails of adolescence in in in a particular way I've relived that time. It brought back for me memories of my own adolescent years. All too vividly somewhat horrifically because because I don't know about you but but but adolescence is there's such intensity in those in those experiences that they that they when they come out of the out of the drawer it in your memory in which they're stored they have all of the vividness and and sometimes were that they had at the time. But it's different. It's different to to watch someone or other people going through through that experience to see it as a witness. And so I felt I was living this time in Palimpsest and it made me want to try to write something about about it that that maybe I don't know whether it has the palimpsest feel I don't know but but that in some way is is an acknowledgement of of the way I can see it with distance and and and what it's like to live it.

[00:07:03] The the other the other thing I would say is that everyone we live in a time you know with Betsey with whom I've been spending some time today some wonderful time talking about why books and the wonderful abundance of why a narratives that now exist and when I was young they didn't exist there was one way a novel that was S.E. Hinton's the outsiders and that was it. It was a great book but it was the only one. And. And we we just read whatever we could get our hands on and we

read books about young people in books about grownups and books about old people you know just all jumbled up together and and there's something wonderful about the about the fact that there are all these different narratives now but I have I have reservations about the fact that they they get put in a separate part of the bookstore under teen fiction where now adult readers don't largely go. And so it's as if adult readers have many have forgotten that young people have lives and thoughts and psyches and send their teenage children there but never go themselves when the fact is that that adolescence is the time in which ourselves our adult selves are formed. And it's it's absolutely vital as a time of our lives. It's when we learn how to be adult people. And if any of us is is ever struggling with you know I say this and I and I have never been proven wrong. If you're struggling with anybody in your life no matter what their age. Picture them in middle school and all. Will be revealed. And as you know lately I've been saying Harvey Weinstein Right. Everything. Everything is clear so.

[00:08:56] So the other thing and I'll come back to this but the other thing. So. So there were these experiences watching my kids and nieces and nephews go through certain experiences and realizing that even though the world has changed and social media has changed so much that the emotions and the intensity of those emotions is no different at all. The VA the VA in the same way that a fellow we read a fellow and you know we're not walking round and doublet and hose but. But we recognized the emotions in Othello. I feel that that the the emotions that young people and particularly girls go through in adolescence don't change. Haven't changed at all and probably will never change. I mean I assume will never change. But there was there was another aspect which I'll come back to in more detail a bit later which is this for me also one of the sort of composting elements came out of an experience that I had as a as a child or as a young person because this for me is also a book. It's a it's a book about this girls these girls friendship but it's also a book too.

[00:10:05] It's also it's also a book about stories and how we tell stories and and what what we need stories for and and so on. And one of the and the catalyst for that aspect of the of the novel arose for me I when I was a kid we lived in Australia we lived in Sydney and we left there when I was nine and I kept in touch with my friends from Sydney the way we did in those days which is we wrote letters. I had pen pals and I kept in touch with several friends from from for a number of years and there came a point when we were all teenagers about 14 when these friends wrote to me.

[00:10:48] We'd been a small class was an all girls school. We were a small group of kids. And they wrote about another classmate who had been a friend of mine but I wasn't writing letters to her and told me about a series of events in her life that that ended with her death and it was it was it was that story has haunted me. That's not the story in this book. But there were many things about that experience that haunted me.

[00:11:14] And one was this the fact that I was putting together I was I had these three different friends telling me snippets but nobody giving me the whole story.

[00:11:28] And in those days in that situation you didn't sort of pick up the phone and call people. Zogby called people in Australia from I was in Canada and you call people you know when you were 14 and ask what happened and even if I had you know the stories that they told that was what they

had been told themselves about what happened which isn't to say that they knew exactly what had happened. That is so. So there was a sense this very strong sense of of their trying to put together a story that made sense or I could make sense of it that I could somehow understand in terms of the person that I had known but without any way of knowing how true or untrue that story was. And I had a funny experience earlier this year I wrote an article in which I spoke of this and I wrote it for a magazine that because because well because they did they they they said we're going to fact check it. I said well good luck. You know I don't know how you're gonna fact check this. And they had somebody from their fact checking team go through years of the Sydney Morning Herald online No for real to find mentioned and they found the mention of it was it was a little news piece really small about this girl's death and absolutely none of the facts resembled the facts I had been told. And then I had this crisis thinking like I totally invented the whole thing.

[00:12:46] I misremembered it and then I thought because there were certain facts that I had been told for example that her she had been found in a cave down down the beach in Sydney there are in a part of Sydney no clues there are there are there are caves that that flood at high tide and I was I had been told and all my life had retained the speck that she'd been found in a cave which was not in the story.

[00:13:13] But then I thought you know what. When I lived in Sydney I didn't know there were caves and I had actually looked up as an adult and discovered there were caves when I already had in my head the story that she had been found in a cave and I thought I didn't so I didn't I didn't invent being told that and and it just made me all the more aware I suddenly thought that was the official story right. What was in the newspaper was was the official story whatever the family was prepared to say to the press which may have. Well it's a little bit I was saying to Betsy or there you know my son sends me a text he says I'm at Jack's house now is that a fact. Well who's to say right. It's asserted as a fact. But we. But you know I don't have a spy to tell me but let me just read a little something from that from the beginning near the beginning of the book it's a different story depending on where you start who's good who's bad what it all means.

[00:14:13] Each of us shapes our stories so they make sense of who we think we are. I can begin when Cassie and I were best friends or I can begin when we weren't anymore where I can begin at the dark end until it all backward. There's no beginning before though Cassie and I met at nursery school and I can't remember a time when I didn't know her. When I didn't pick her sleek white head out of a crowd and know exactly where she was in a room and think of her some ways as mine Cassie was tiny with bones like a bird. She was always the smallest girl in the class in the span of her ankle was the span of my wrist. She had shiny white blonde hair almost albino she was so fair her skin translucent and a little pink but you'd be wrong to mistake her size and power for frailty. All you had to do was to look into her eyes still blue eyes that turned gray in dark weather like the water in the quarry and you could see that she was tough strong. I guess is a better word although of course in the end she wasn't strong enough but even when we were small she had a quality about her. What the hell and I'm not chicken are you sort of way according to my mother and to Cassie's mother Bev Cassie and I became friends in the second week of nursery when we were four years old.

[00:15:28] That was always the story though I can't tell now whether I remember it or I've just been told so many times that I invented the memory. I was playing with a group of kids in the sandbox and Cassie stood in the middle of the playground hands at her sides like a zombie staring at everything. Not apparently nervous but totally detached I left my friends to come touch her elbow and I said so I was told hey can build a castle with me. And she broke into that rare broad smile of hers a famous smile made all the better when she was bigger by the Georgia jagged gap between her front teeth.

[00:15:59] She came with me back to the sandbox and that my mother always said was that.

[00:16:07] So that's they they they. So. So they've always been friends. And that's the story that they believe and that's you know I think somebody said to ask me not long ago how did you how did you when did you decide you wanted to be a writer. And.

[00:16:24] And I realized you know as I was telling the story which I've told all my life which is you know as soon as I realized when I was little that that stories were things that were made up instead of just existing in the world like stones and rivers. I wanted to do that. And I was young enough that my parents gave me a typewriter for my sixth birthday which is actually a fact they did but but then I realized you know that that that was a story. I mean I don't really remember being 4 so that's a story that my parents told me and and you know my mother was somebody who who who I think wanted on some level to be a writer and who was a writer. I mean she she she wrote endless letters wonderful letters that I have saved and when I was in college she wrote to me three times a week when I was overseas she would write to me almost every day these Ara Grams typed you know. So there were no margins. And my father's father who was in the Navy and then in business spent his free time writing novels that were never published. And. And and in his later years wrote a very long family history sort of thousand page family history. And and when I thought about those things you know my sister who's a lawyer always complains you know mom wanted to be a lawyer and she never got to be a lawyer.

[00:17:41] And that's the only reason I'm a lawyer is because because you know I'm living out mom's dream and I thought well I always thought I was thought I came into the world you know the story always was I came into the world a writer but actually you know maybe I was just brainwashed into living everybody else's dream without knowing it you know. But I digress I digress. All right. It's a problem I have. So so just when I was writing this story I don't. Has anybody here seen seen the. Nina Simone documentary which is really wonderful. Yeah really wonderful. So I had watched it when it came I was watching again and I realized after the book was published I realized that's what I was trying to do is is is like something like jazz. I wanted this the central story to be very simple like a like a jazz melody. And then for there to be riffs. And for the riffs to be as much as central or as as sort of as much in the foreground or in the background as as the reader would choose to put them that makes sense. So so the the story I think of two of a friendship unraveling particularly between girls in that time and that moment of life is fairly archetypal almost universal. I would also interject that that that another thing that drew me to writing about this is that I feel that if there's one thing that's that's dismissed or dismissal in our culture it's teenage girl drama it's some sense that you know well we know that story. Who cares. All those girls in their drama you know. But but actually actually given

that that 50 percent of us are women who've gone through some version of teenage drama and given that all the rest the other 50 percent men live with women or around women it seems actually pretty central to human experience.

[00:19:46] But I wanted it.

[00:19:47] I wanted it to have a sort of I described it and I described it to someone as a children's book for grown ups and they said A why a book and I said Well no I mean a children's book for grownups. And and in trying to you know it's hard sometimes you think as a writer you would have a good explanation. But what I what I meant by that is is that when you're when you're a kid or when you're reading children's books you you accept things in the world. I mean part of the process of becoming an adult. Right. Which is what adolescence is about is when you're a kid. The world happens around you and you figure that your experience is normal. However weirder experience actually is because it's the only thing you know. And then you get to be a teenager and you look up and you start to look around and say you go to a sleepover at your friend's house and you think well either her house is normal or my house is normal but they can't both be normal. So which is normal. And how do I fit that like how do how do I make it all. How do I answer it. How do I make it off. And and then and then you start to look you know that's why teenagers want things want to be normal right is because they suddenly have an apprehension of what normal is and when my daughter was in middle school she could. Are about 60 kids in her class and she she could she could have given you at a moment's notice a ranking one to 60 popularity wise. Right. Was just that was just a hierarchy in her head and and and them all these rules and it's not like somebody handed out a sheet of rules but she had all these rules in her head so she she knew that she felt she could speak somebody who was 10 or 15 points ahead of her on the on the popularity scale.

[00:21:27] But not if they were some not if they were actually in the presence of somebody who was 10 points above them then. Then she had to pass on by anyway.

[00:21:36] But but but when you're a kid you don't have any of that right when you're a kid you just take what you're given. And so when you when you think of a Greek myth and the way or many children's stories in which animals are important actors with agency and and symbolism and relevance which they are in this book for Julia you if you think say so zoos falls in love with a maiden Harry gets jealous. He returns the maiden into a cow. When you're reading that you don't think hey wait a minute people don't turn into cows right. You just think oh of course. Right. Like a parrot turned her into a cow and then we move on. And that's actually you know one of the things that that's that's something that that you put away when you move towards adulthood and you say you know those that that's actually nonsense. That's not how the world works. The world is a rational place with with you know things that are true and things that are invented and there's fact and there's fantasy and you know never the twain shall meet. And I at least spent much of my adult life feeling that I was moving towards the light towards some sort of stable clear lucid greater understanding.

[00:22:50] And then I sort of hit 40 and. Yeah. And then I started to think you know I know nothing I understand nothing. It's all totally mysterious it makes no sense to me. And I also realized that all the

time all these years intervening years I have lived exactly like a child. I mean I don't know if any of you has pets at home but if you do you know that your pet is it is a force with a character a very complex personality with wishes and wills that that's sort of how he or she imposes on your life and they tell you things and remember things and smile at you too if you're lucky and you know it certainly I came to a point my parents in there in their last years would go that my father couldn't walk very well and they would go in the car every day to the local park where they lived and they would count the Swans and I would speak to them every evening.

[00:23:45] And. And you know we would talk about the weather and this one's always for sure and then other stuff maybe. But but I would say how many swans were there today and they would tell me.

[00:23:55] And now when I see my parents died and now when I see two swans I see my parents and you can tell me that's nonsense. But that's not nonsense to me. I feel that that they are absolutely and emphatically my my parents as if they were something out of a Greek myth. And and I actually believe that many if not most of us live in the world that way although we don't acknowledge it.

[00:24:18] So one of the reasons that I wanted my narrator to be 17 rather than 25 or 30 is because I wanted her still to have some access even if not consciously to that to that way of being in the world because otherwise I would have had to make her 50 and I didn't want to make that seem too old and I would also say while I'm at it you know that when I talk about about things like the Greek myths and you know my story begins with two girls going into a wood and going into the woods and having adventures we we're all this is this I do I believe this strongly you know Nabokov said this lovely thing about about the about the literary experience that it's the reader and the writer climbing the mountain from opposite sides at the same time to meet at the top and in some way that really isn't true of say film.

[00:25:16] When you read a book each reader brings to it our own accumulated experiences right of of the places we've been and the people we've known and the things that we've done and also everything we've read right. Are we are we are as much made up of our literarily lived lives as we are of our literally live lives right. You know Hansel and Gretel pencil it from from sort of Hansel and Gretel or a little red riding hood too. You know I don't know. John Green to Shakespeare you know those narratives to to the newspaper to to the last movie we saw to Project Runway you know all of those narratives we internalize them. My father used to say culture is what's left when you've forgotten everything. And as someone who forgets almost everything I can attest that you know certainly you hope there's some there is something left right. But it's it's almost as if you're you internalize and masturbate and digest all that.

[00:26:20] And it's in there somewhere and and and and things resonate. And the more the more stories we've internalized them the more things resonate.

[00:26:29] And so for me at least this is a book that is full of other stories. There are all sorts of other stories that echo in the book which which may or may not be noticeable to other people.

[00:26:41] And it's not as though there's supposed you know it's not as though they're supposed to be sort of read like this is an allusion to or this is an illusion but it's just I think the way of the way of being in the world you know that I that I wanted to try to convey so this is from the second part the beginning of the second part. My mother assures me that it happens to everyone sooner or later for reasons more or less identifiable. Everyone loses a best friend at some point not in this she moved to Tucson sense but in the sense that we grew apart. I who pride myself on seeing things can't even now properly sort out what happened.

[00:27:20] Cassie had her version though she never told it to me. And when much later I asked her outright what happened to us is how I put it which seemed more neutral than I felt. She looked at me a long time a look I'd describe as hurt though I was the one who'd been wronged surely and shook her head slightly.

[00:27:37] When I gave her a chance to explain. That was the best she could do seventh grade is difficult for most.

[00:27:43] My parents said it was the time of life they'd least like to live again which wasn't helpful as I had no choice but to live it.

[00:27:50] But seventh grade is differently difficult for each person. For Zach FILKINS It was difficult because they didn't have a middle school math class challenging enough for him and he had to go over to the high school to join the advanced freshman. On the other hand Zach wasn't interested in going to the middle school prom so didn't ask anyone and didn't have to contemplate the possibility of rejection whereas Brent O'Conner a nice guy but in seventh grade he still didn't break five feet had to brave the humiliation of being turned down for the dance by three girls one of whom was me. I was already 5 foot 6.

[00:28:20] It was impossible.

[00:28:22] Then there was the slightly different challenge of being Alicia Romans the fourth girl he asked. Who knew it but who accepted cheerfully and held her head as high as if she'd been his first choice.

[00:28:32] There are the social struggles and the agonies and embarrassments of puberty. I won't forget the mixture of triumph and pity I felt when Bridget Mulvaney floats down the corridor tossing her famous auburn curls with a period stain the size of a saucer on her purple Gypsy skirt and the weight of the world that falls upon each of us in varying degrees as we finally relinquish childhood clouds of glory to live ever after in our earthly realm in seventh grade. Jude Robyn lived up to his name and was arrested for shoplifting a camera from Walmart. Andrew Dray got a caution from his law enforcement uncle for weed smoking and small time dealing. Rumor headed that Stacey village gave blowjobs to half a dozen guys in one night at Tessa Rubin's party in late May of that year in the struggle for Stacey was that it didn't matter whether the rumor was true. There was no PowerPoint

loudly denying it because that meant no more as a truth or a falsehood than did the original story. In seventh grade we moved suddenly into a world of adult actions and of adult conjecture. It was also a world of adult consciousness with all the strangeness that implies like my mother's story about Cassie and me is that our paths always destined to diverge simply took their natural course so the girls do grow apart.

[00:29:47] And when they when they get into middle school and new kids come into the classroom in the small town and and Cassie sort of takes up with a cooler girl who Julia calls the evil morsel and they never have a big bust up they still see each other some in the way you know you might.

[00:30:09] But but but they're never close in the same way again.

[00:30:13] And then eventually Cassie Cassie runs away they're a bunch of stuff has been going on in her life and and and and Julia tells the story of what happens to Cassie even though she wasn't there and she has heard it not from Cassie herself but from another friend of theirs. You know there was one one or two reviewers who were like well a student made a mistake in the point of view because how could Julia have known but that was that was intentional.

[00:30:50] You know it's always I do always like. I like the idea that you know you spend like three or four years working on a book and you really think about it quite a bit and then and then and then the reviewers are like mistake huh. Instead of thinking wow that's weird I wonder why she would do that but. But it was it was on purpose and the point the point was that that you know that's how we actually live our lives.

[00:31:15] I think you know I'm I realize as I look around me that there are a lot of writers who are about my age and my generation who are frustrated in some way with realism as it's been handed to us and that manifests in different ways I don't know if if there are readers of Rachel couscous wonderful recent novels in the room tonight.

[00:31:36] But she she has she has sort of taken a sip baldy in a sort of way through that by by having a main character a first person narrator who largely stays on the periphery and and tells the stories of other people that she encounters I think part of the part of the frustration is is with with some sense of of I had some I was speaking to a man a professor at Harvard and he said I love to read fiction and I said it was not great.

[00:32:09] He was like he was in some social science and and I said Isn't that great. You know a lot of people don't. A lot of people a lot of middle aged men I didn't say a lot of middle aged men but I met a lot of middle aged men don't read fiction. And and he said Well what I like about it is that you know in life I can't really tell what people are into entirely what people are like. I have to be figuring it out.

[00:32:30] But in fiction I get told. And I thought to myself and that's what it's like.

[00:32:37] Does that because I guess as a writer I feel pretty strongly that when I'm trying to do is is in some way represent or or or record or illuminate the human experiences as I have myself experienced it and I feel like I haven't had the experience of somebody coming up and whispering in my ear about somebody I'm having dinner with.

[00:32:59] Is a quiet but generous man. Right. Like it just doesn't happen. It doesn't happen like this is so in life you're actually having you're just having to figure it out as you go along. That's sort of that's that's an end. And so what we do is make up stories right. And we and we do that we take the facts that we have it's like join the dots. We take the facts and and and then and then we.

[00:33:23] And then we try to to make a story that makes sense and we do that in our own lives about ourselves and we do that about the people that we love and we do that about the people that we've just met.

[00:33:33] And and so in this in this novel there's a lot of uncertainty.

[00:33:37] The novel asks you in a way to to have opinions about what you think happens or doesn't happen. And you know sometimes people say to me is because because Cassie. Her mother her mother. Gets a boyfriend. I hope this and this as well. I don't think it's a spoiler effect.

[00:33:57] There's no there's no real like hey wait. So people say Well is he is he abusive or not.

[00:34:04] And and my answer is Well Julia has her opinion right. But but it's not like Julia. How would Julia know.

[00:34:15] You know might my sister not long ago was talking about a friend of ours from from thirty five years ago and she said I always thought. I always thought that there was something odd in her father that you know that her father was abusive in.

[00:34:31] And we marveled at the fact that we never knew and we still don't know. And you know when you're 15 you don't ask or very few people have the courage to ask. And even if you ask you don't get told often I think you know the the world's a complicated place with many different layers. And there's a lot that we don't know and we live in. We actually live in constant uncertainty. Is my son at Jack's house. We live in constant uncertainty and we tell ourselves stories in order to believe that the world that the world makes more sense than maybe then maybe it does.

[00:35:08] You know there's a thing that I read when I was while I was working on the book but that I found very interesting because it seems to me what we do with stories and and now of course being me I know I know it was in a book because I can see in my head the pictures on the page but it was saying that it was about it was about neurologically the relation between our eyes and our brain and the fact that our are our brains only process 30 percent of what our eyes take in and the rest our brains fill in with what what they know from prior experience which is why a small child sees a monster in the corner of the room and a grown up sees a pile of laundry because a grown up has

many years of experience of realizing that that thing that you're not you can't quite tell what it's actually a pile of laundry. But we but we do that you know that's what we do in life and it's how we it's how we understand people and if we if we didn't understand people that way we would actually have to listen more closely and pay more attention and realize how little how little we know and how often the stories differ from the stories that we thought we knew sometimes I felt that growing up and being a girl was about learning to be afraid not paranoid exactly but always alert and aware.

[00:36:24] Like checking out the exits in the movie theater or the fire escape in a hotel. You came to know in a way you hadn't as a kid that the body you inhabited was vulnerable imperfectly fortified. On TV in the papers in books and movies it isn't ever men being raped or kidnapped or bludgeoned or dismembered or burned with acid. But in stories and crime shows and TV series and movies and in life too it's going on all the time all around you. So you learn in your mind that your body needs to be protected. It's both precious and totally dispensable depending on whom you encounter. You don't want to end up at a party not knowing how to get home. You don't want to end up walking down a street especially a quiet street by yourself at night. You don't want to open your door to a strange man at all really ever if you're alone even if he's wearing a uniform because his uniform could be a disguise it happens I've seen it on TV you start to grow up and you learn from all the stories around you what the world is like and you start to lose freedoms not because anybody actually tells you that you've lost them but because you know you need to take care without a friend beside you no biking on the Oregon Trail no swimming at the quarry no hiking in the woods where darkness isolation the outdoors unlocked windows men you don't know and then you realize too that even men you know or thought you knew might not be ok a math teacher that followed a high school in nearby New Hampshire was caught in an FBI sting with thousands of kiddie porn images on his computer.

[00:37:46] Pictures of little girls kept in cages someone said a rabbi in Boston was caught spying on the women of his congregation in their ritual baths. The guy who owned the diner we'd sometimes gone to on our way back from the beach less than half an hour from our house was accused of sexually harassing his waitresses and forcing one or was it three or five. They kept coming out of the woodwork it had gone on for years apparently to have sex with him. So when I remembered the harried woman in tight mom jeans who'd served us the last time memorable for a strawberry birthmark the size of a gumball on her right cheek. And for the fact that with her heavily outline China Blue Eyes she was otherwise notably pretty or had been until life had ground her down and worn her out prematurely furrowing her skin. I remembered her and wondered if she was one of them if she'd been forced onto her knees in the pantry after hours or whether the birthmark hit spared her like what Cassie had told me about the sign from God. At Passover whether her floor had proven her blessed protection you get to middle school and you think about these things. The world opens up. History stretches behind you and the future stretches before you and you're suddenly aware of the wild unknowable interior lives of everyone around you. The realization that each and every person lives in an unspoken world is full and strange as your own and that you can't ever hope entirely to know anything not even yourself.

[00:39:02] But just as the world is opening up it's closing too. And things reveal their previously unimagined shapes without it being said I was treated as a kid with a bright future and Cassie. Well

she wasn't necessarily not going to have one but her path would be different from mine without anybody saying so outright. I was being told that my path was the more valuable I got that from my parents and from Mr. Cartwright when he chose me for speech team and from my teachers when they patted me on the back and gave me good grades and from my grandmother who when she asked me about Cassie at Thanksgiving and I told her we'd been drifting apart caressed my cheek with her shiny hand that smelled of rosewater and said It's hard growing up because each of us must follow our own star which was of itself pretty neutral. But then she added and some of us have brighter stars to follow than others I'm afraid and if we were growing up and growing up differently now and if there was some faintly ominous sense about the adolescence and adulthood that lay before us as if there'd inevitably be a couple along the way and drugs or violence or car crashes or general misfortune or for the girls the folly of careless sex or the evils of predatory men who lurked unidentifiable as guerrilla fighters among us then the unspoken cry that echoed from all sides was save yourself because it was clear that it was the only thing you could hope to do and even that might be impossible not stop there. Thank you. And happily take questions

[00:40:31] If anybody has a question.

[00:40:36] Well I think it can be both things.

[00:40:38] You know I mean I certainly think there are very few of us who ground in the world saying I am. I'm a really bad person. Like we go round I think thinking that we're trying our best and we're pretty good people and and and and the way we tell a story.

[00:40:55] Usually usually sort of more or less if it doesn't exonerate us. It's the best possible spin on how things went down. I think not always. I mean there are people who are who aren't that way but I think many of us are but in that in that in that way I think it is also a sort of sense. I mean it's all sense making of one of one kind or another.

[00:41:23] You know I have to sort of look at it from a different angle I've long been obsessed with the fact that so little of what matters most in our lives breaks the surface right.

[00:41:36] There's there's a there's a there's the wonderful in the wonderful Chekhov story The Lady with the little dog there's a moment when it's about a guy Gaurav who's married with kids and he has many affairs and then he has an affair with the lady with a little dog and he sort of thinks like any other affair he'll be able to just throw it over and he can't believe he gets obsessed and he goes and tracks her down and sort of character starts it up again and he's just he thinks about it all the time and he's walking his kid to school and he they're talking about stuff and he's thinking to himself how can it be that the thing that matters most to me in the whole world nobody knows about.

[00:42:10] And then his next thought is that's true for everybody right.

[00:42:15] And I think you know I'm always amazed to think that right that that the people that that the people that we know the best we don't we don't have any I I mean I can't go on about this at some

length but we don't have any idea I mean there was a moment when late in his life I was visiting my French grandfather and he was sitting in a chair by the window looking at the chair that my grandmother used to sit in before she died and he was looking at the window at the sea and I said Oh God Pat what are you thinking about and I.

[00:42:48] And I thought I thought he was going to say well this thing about your grandmother or you know it's about getting old or I say you know think about it you said I was remembering visiting an oil well in in the Sahara Desert in the fall of 1954.

[00:43:05] Right. And and this and just the sense that like each of us walks around with with this enormous wealth of experience and impression and and and thought and fantasy and imagination and and so little of it is at any moment coming out into the world. And so when we know each other we we know a lot of what we know is the is is almost animal right. I mean we know gestures and and the temper of a voice and the way somebody moves and the rhythm of their sentences and the sorts of things they like to say but a huge amount of of what's inside us is always invisible.

[00:43:47] And so. But you wouldn't say if you've been married. I mean I've been I've been married to my husband since nineteen ninety two and and what I said I don't know him of course not. But but but on some level I also don't right.

[00:44:01] And and and we're always when it happens as happens with the rupture of a love affair which is in a way for many girls their first love affair is is is a friendship is a girl's friendship.

[00:44:15] But when when a love affair breaks there's this moment of thinking.

[00:44:20] But I thought I knew but I thought I knew what did I not know.

[00:44:25] And then and then it goes on for years because you also when you're when you're with that person again in the group and you think I know the way you touch your hair I know I know what your handwriting is like I know what you sound you know what you're breathing is like when you're asleep but do I know you now. Now I don't even know what you had for breakfast.

[00:44:45] I don't know where you've been for the past two weeks I know nothing so I have digressed. I'm sorry yeah.

[00:44:54] Yeah. No I. That's hard to repeat all that.

[00:44:58] But but but I think to say that the story is pressing against that issue of not not knowing and an end it is.

[00:45:06] And I think you know for me from for me I feel it's a to too much information.

[00:45:15] But I remember when I was young it seemed to me somehow terrifying that you that people would would not think of themselves as the same person their whole lifelong you know that people sort of sometimes people just up and change everything.

[00:45:33] And that seemed to me when I was young. Terrifying because if somebody could just change. Change the way they where they live changed their name cut ties with their family begin again like that should be exhilarating and exciting. That's the American. Like the American Freedom reinvent yourself be somebody new. But on the other hand then who are we. What. You know what is it to be an authentic self. Right. And and and again related to that if if an authentic self can never be known right.

[00:46:07] If you go back to the German the German Romantic German Romantics and you know Kant was big on subjectivity.

[00:46:16] But but but but there was a chap called Victor who didn't actually believe there was any external that if there's an external reality we can't ever get to it that all we ever have is our is our subject subjective impressions. There's I don't know if anybody's read Penelope Fitzgerald's The Blue Flower which is a wonderful novel about novelists who was an oppressed and poet at that time. And it opens it opens. He's coming home with a friend they're university students he's coming home and it's wash day at the house but he says to his friend which is they've been in fetus class and he says to his friend think the wash basket right.

[00:46:58] Because the idea is that they both think the wash basket it will actually be there or it will be there for both of them in the same way at the same time. But but that we're all engaged you know according to that sort of extreme view which largely does not hold sway. You know we're all imagining the world together. Right. And the question is how do you know where does that overlap.

[00:47:16] But but I think there is some degree that question when when can you transcend.

[00:47:21] Can you ever transcendence subjectivity to really understand another person. Or is that it is that a sort of

[00:47:30] A moment of where you're sort of flattering your own vanity if you think you really can and and and at the end of this book you know I think there's there's the question not only has Julia not been paying attention recently but but has she also had an illusion all along about who you know what who her friend was.

[00:47:54] I don't know. I don't know yet. I think many years ago at the Guardian he was he had the title chief literary critic but he hasn't. I don't think he has known you know in some way it probably does and over time you know it's been a long time. We've we we met on the eve of my 21st birthday it's been a while so. So I feel like. But I mean the truth is that most of our conversations are like are you picking her up or am I right. You didn't get the dry cleaning.

[00:48:25] So so but but but I think you know over time there is sort of shared interests and I mean I've you know I think say bald is is a writer who you know James read when I read those books when they came out I read them afterwards. But but when Sable was still alive you know I mean I. James and he met several times and and had conversations and so. So I think you know that the. And we talked about those books you know 20 years ago. Is it that long. Not quite. I don't know. Maybe I better. Yeah. Close to 20 years.

[00:49:08] So. So I think you know there's there's some way in which on the on the on the masturbated culture front you know and end up being the product of I mean we're the product of a certain.

[00:49:23] It's one of the things just you know for the young people out there like you think certain writers matter and there are sort of culturally important and you think that's just how it is and then like just you wait twenty five years from now nobody will remember who they are and you'll be fine.

[00:49:35] It's like it's like pop music it's like you don't remember the go goes right. So suddenly suddenly you realize that you're actually in this tiny hermetic little segment of the world that you know this is just when you came you know when you came of age and what was what people were talking about. And so I think you know he and I more than most have have probably overlaps or or share share certain things.

[00:50:03] I mean you know over time we've been in the same place at the same time quite a bit.

[00:50:11] Well I mean I think you know there's a whole broader conversation that. But but but but but I you know I had I had I had an old friend from college write me an email in the dead of night. I wondered if he'd had a few but you know you know you get those e-mails you like oh haven't heard from you in 25 years. And it's very long with no paragraph breaks. Oh but but he was saying he was saying in his possibly drunken e-mail that he said isn't it because we were at college and that in the 80s in the sort of the height of post structural is deconstruct you know Derrida used to come and lecture and Chris Dave and all these people and and and he said Isn't it strange that that the literary theory that you know we so thought was so cool and sort of immersed ourselves in has caused the ruination of the American nation.

[00:51:09] Thirty trickled down 30 years later. And it does seem like he might be drunk but there is also some. There is also somewhat way in which I think you know you that the the that

[00:51:20] That I must have been in my 20s when I early 20s when I went in London to hear Alan Gurganus read from oldest living Confederate Widow Tells All and he was in the Q and A he said and I was really shocked. He said well the third person narrative is finished. You know there's only first person now has Like what.

[00:51:41] And and and and he went on to explain.

[00:51:44] He said you know there's there's this sort of divine authority that that the third person presumes that is no longer possible.

[00:51:52] And it's certainly true that you can chart a narrative from with sort of secularization and and then the modernist project and so on that that I mean and it's all tied in and now I do I know I start to sound like a crazy person. I know I know. But as they did a survey in the 40s asking people American citizens do you think you're important. And most of them said no. And in the 1980s or 90s they did the same survey and the numbers it was like eighty five to 15 in 1940 thought and then reversed right. The rise of right the rise of the individual has is like the rise the individual has risen too far but but but this this whole thing of how we place ourselves in society which which which is something which is which is has been much complicated in the last

[00:52:49] Hundred years certainly and which has its effects in literal terms and then also has its effects more broadly to set time for last minute about that children's book. So this young lady was saying that that in the book there's a lot about what it means to be an adult and what it means to be a child and

[00:53:13] And what did. Going back to this question of writing a children's book for adults.

[00:53:19] What does it mean.

[00:53:20] I mean I think you know that sort of I really do see adolescence as a passage right a crucible that that shapes I mean or an envelope if you will but that shapes people right and changes the way we are in the world and we're never there's nobody really who goes unchanged through that time. I'll tell you a little personal story I change schools when we went to Canada I went I'd been at a girls school with a uniform and I went to a coed school coed school with no uniform and wear when the teacher didn't show up. Alex Syrian who were mirror sunglasses indoors would pull down the shades and we had to play spin the bottle.

[00:54:09] And yeah that was fifth grade and and it wasn't working because people weren't kissing the people they were supposed to kiss.

[00:54:18] And Alex superior because he was the coolest boys. He said you know people have to say that people they won't kiss and those people aren't allowed to play. And Louis case to that when he said well I won't kiss an animal kiss Claire and I start telling this story anyway I just want to say that and this is you know a public school and trial and and I went to Yale and Louis came managed a sports bar in Union Station

[00:54:49] So life is the revenge of the nerds. But but there was a reason why I told that life is the revenge of the nerds.

[00:54:56] There was a reason why I told that story that I can't now recall but this question of it is this Chris because it's the crucible that that forms us. Right.

[00:55:04] I feel like you know you do you can you really can see the ways in which people are shaped by that time nobody gets through it unchanged. And and and it is the time when you have both. Right. If you if you if you see it as a sort of life as a as a as a process you know you're both a child an adult in that in that alternately in that in that period and in and in varying proportions and not always more adult when you're older either. I mean I think there's a and and I think the the way of it is this I guess maybe I have naive almost words worthy and ideas of childhood that that you know there was no childhood before the 19th century right. I mean they were just little people. That's why they're painted that way. And in all that fancy stuff. Right. Because they weren't seen as children and then childhood was sort of an invention. But I think I do believe in I mean I certainly had a childhood and it was great. And I was I I didn't feel responsible for things and I felt I felt like I I was hopeful for all sorts of stuff. And and then I feel like adolescence was pretty tough on that and and narratively I'm digressing and just need to stop talking. But but but I am one of the things when my kids were smaller I before they were teenagers and I was observing the misery of adolescence.

[00:56:31] I when they were kids we would read together and I would read all the books from my from my childhood and add new ones to them. But once them from my own childhood and what I found is that that that experience of reading like a child was one of the most joyful experiences I know and that that if in some way I and I know adult books that do that when I mentioned them to people nobody'd ever heard of them because they were French and old. But but but when my book was reviewed in England by Ursula look when. Which was very thrilling to me it was reviewed in the Guardian because of the Gwynne and she mentioned one of the books that I that I had as a as a which is a novel called in English The Lost Domain but for me it's French title is the common and it is it's it's an it's it's a it's a children's book for grownups in the sense that it has this sort of mystery and magic but it's but it's about and it's about growing up and there's dark stuff in it too. But I haven't I would just say in my defense at this point like I flew in today so it's bedtime for me

[00:57:42] And of course. Thank you everybody for coming.

[00:57:45] Thank you so much. 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.