



Library podcast

Luis Alberto Urrea discusses 'The House of Broken Angels'

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[00:00:37] Hello. Good evening thank you for coming out tonight.

[00:00:44] My name is mishit stone and I'm a reader services librarian here at the central library and I want to thank you for coming out tonight to hear Luis Alberto Urrea speak. This event is sponsored by the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thank you to those who donate and support to the library authors series. Gary Kunis and media sponsored the Seattle Times and presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. Tonight we are here to celebrate a new novel by Luis Alberto Eurya. The House of Broken Flowers. I'm not doing the formal introduction but I just have to share that I loved loved loved this novel and Seattle shows up just CNO in The New York Times review that just came out via Taan when I said this all complicated all compelling and Urias powerful rendering of a Mexican American family that is also an American family. And what is your Raya's novel. But a Mexican American novel that is also an American novel. Tonight we have two very special introductions. The first introduction is from the consul of Mexico in Seattle Dr. Gilberto Don which I handed to him and then Elliott Bay. Thank you

[00:02:10] Thank you very much. Thank you it's so wonderful to be here. The public library is amazing. This building is just superb. We're so happy every time we'll get to do things together. And today it's a special day. And just to be very brief but to have to use it to relax year with us to celebrate not only his latest work but to celebrate his past work and to celebrate it in a moment when we were saying you know this is what we are. This is what a Mexican American communities. In many ways as part of the greater U.S. community yes part of the Greater Seattle community as part of the Greater Washington State community. And I think that's an important message that needs coming out there you see recently. I don't know if you'll know about the James Beard Award for the best restaurants in the U.S.. Well I don't know if you know that in the past. In January they decided to give up for James Beard price for more American classics to a place called Little set of tamales.

[00:03:33] So does the Mollis. If you haven't been there you have to go there.

[00:03:36] It's in a place called Union Gap in the Washington right part of the Washington small place. Marvelous family.

[00:03:44] And they do this but they want a new American classic. So it really shows you a lot of it.

[00:03:50] I think of what you get from a from the work that we have. So thank you very much for everyone. And we said thank you very much for coming. Thank you for being here for sharing with us what you do and to to allow us to understand a little bit more by hearing you what went into this latest work.

[00:04:13] And with that I'm thinking that the public library.

[00:04:18] I think it's of course also thinking Elliott Bay Book Company and without giving the floor to Rick Stevenson from the Elliott Company thank you thank you.

[00:04:36] Roberta thank you. Misha also and thank all of you for being here tonight. I'm not sure about the formal part when it broke. I'm being set up to give a formal introduction. That's not generally been my way. But I will say because there's there's aspects of having Luis Urrea here tonight which are homecoming. He grew up as many of you know at the other end of five. And and yet he's had long ties family up to this part of things. And also to harken a little bit to what Roberta just said about celebrating the past. Before we get to tonight's book I think it's good to note that it has now been 25 years. 25 years ago this year that the Devil's Highway which really has come to be a landmark work was published. This said after years of Louise trying to get published you know anything's seriously published and to know that not only what that book meant as it came out but that result in the ensuing 25 years there have now been 17 works of fiction poetry and nonfiction which is in and around a very active full teaching schedule. He's a beloved teacher professor presently at the University of Illinois at Chicago. But I also know he often has been at some other writing conferences where there's a very intense work going on and it has a lot to do with helping launch get writers find their way and come into the world and he's one of those generous souls who's done that as long with writing such remarkable and full body books and varied books as he's done and these books the place they have come to occupy in readers hearts and minds and in our cultural discussion of least 100 times.

[00:06:31] He's had three of his books have been selected for programs like Seattle reads the community reading thing all over the country. His work is read. Kerry talked about and made part of wherever it is. And so tonight it's all a culmination of that because he's here with this wonderful extraordinary new novel a book that has just been published and just getting these great reviews as you read from the one that or Viet Newin has just coming in the New York Times the housebroken angels and we're going with angels. I had to check to see how we're pronouncing Angel and angels tonight but because it is a book that Luis will read from and talk about but it looks at. A family that is of our of us and a family dealing with its lives and death. And I think the thing that's so Luis talking to somebody beforehand about how death gets written about and how sometimes people can write about the heaviest things with the lightest touch. It's not like a matter of slight but it's there's depth there but it's in this book which has has a death in its pages. Two of the most significant characters

die in the book. But their lives are our love you know their their love and their lives have remarked upon and celebrated. And there's a form of death in our lives that if we acknowledge it there's also life and death and Luis does this beautiful thing in this book as you will no doubt get to hear. And certainly as you get to read the book he the other thing I'd say is I actually you don't bring anything in the way of notes but Luis in these in these twenty five years has had this incredible recognition come to his work.

[00:08:26] And it's it's the prizes include prizes from outside the country. They include the Curium prize the Christopher Award the American Book Award. He's the editor award which is mystery. He's for a story of Lannan Literary Award the Western states book award which is one of the first places where we've met him Foundation New Mexico that for his first book of poems The Colorado Book Award. He's been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and for the PEN Faulkner word. He's been inducted into the Latino Literature Hall of Fame and he is here tonight to read and talk about the House of broken Angels which he will do taking questions at the end of his holding forth part and then he'll be at this table here to sign copies of his books which we have copies of many certainly to housebroken Angels as well as many of his other wonderful unvaried books. So again for everyone at Elliott Bay and again to very much thank everyone and Roberto and Moyses Himmelfarb from the consul of Mexico it's so great to have a cultural entity or an entity from from Mexico and any of these countries that we are here in Seattle to work with the cultural exchange which is so important in a city like this to have it. So we're grateful for them being here as well tonight. And now Ashley please join in giving a warm welcome back to the wonderful writer Luis Alberto Urrea. When I started this Seattle

[00:10:03] Not in the house. And also Claremont High in San Diego.

[00:10:11] So yeah I come from a barrio called Colonia Independencia in Tijuana. The street we lived on was called the ramp by Independencia. So you can see a theme in my life of independence started from the beginning. My dad was Mexican my mom was American. My mom was from New York City. My dad was from Rosario Sinaloa Oh I heard there's always somebody from Sinaloa you hear them say Oh yeah. And if you read into the beautiful North. That was what became press come out on this but it's actually Rossetti's you know look I want to tell you this about my family though my mom was the North American. She wasn't the blonde blue eyed one it was my dad my dad his mother our matriarch from Rosario was named Guadalupe Murray. Red hair blue eyes rosy cheeked little Irish Mexican lass and my grandfather one who was Basque is not Spanish it's Basque which I have fun because everywhere I go somebody Basque comes to talk to me. And last night in San Diego a Basque person was at the bookstore and said you know our language has no route to any other language and I said I know and she said you know what they say and said Don't even say it. They say that we are the Atlanta yens from Atlanta.

[00:11:52] And she said How did you know.

[00:11:56] So he you know it means in Basque golden man that rather than. So I like to tell people that my grandparents got together and launch this genetic accident of the blonde Mexican family. But you know we are the melting pot and a lot of people have assumptions about people from Mexico.

[00:12:20] And it's not true.

[00:12:22] Everything you said my brother the consul he's my cousin.

[00:12:26] No not really.

[00:12:30] So I just want to tell you a few things about us and then about this book and then I like to chat.

[00:12:36] So you may have questions I'd like to answer them if I can. I came out of Tijuana about three and a half years old. Almost for the colonia was torn apart by tuberculosis. A lot of people died. In our neighborhood and I had it I had tuberculosis German measles scarlatina and some other things and so my parents brought me into San Diego. My dad was on a green card and of course my mom was returning to San Diego as an American citizen and they wanted to get me well and I was really lucky because of course I got the medical attention. But my father was working at a tuna cannery. And people would not help them. My mother worked in a department store. He worked in the tuna cannery. Nobody would help them because I was contagious. They were afraid of me and make Gunnel working next to my father said We will take him in. So every morning 6:00 a.m. my dad would take me to his house in national city San Diego on West 20th Street and he would turn me over to the ladies of the House and the two men would go get tuna.

[00:13:54] This was an interesting phase from my father because he went from that to bread truck driver and from that to working in bowling alleys and his entire life he worked in bowling alleys where I spent a lot of time playing as I grew up the big Brunswick machines where I played. Plus he had nudist magazines in the back of it a little education there but my father had been living quite an impact for life in Mexico. He had been a poor boy in Sinaloa got his first shoes at 13. He worked in silver mines and at 14 years old he had to help amputate a man's leg who was trapped in a cave in compulsory military service. But he knew I think that the military was away like many people do to make their lives better. And he did very well. He advanced. He went to Mexico City from Sinaloa and my father because he was a pianist was very dexterous and he learned to type very quickly.

[00:15:09] So when he was on guard duty in the presidential palace in Mexico and there he was typing at about 2:00 in the morning and he sensed the presence behind him and he turned around and it was the president and he jumped up the president and the president said you can type.

[00:15:27] And he said the CCC I said type a letter for me. I've got to send a letter. So my dad typed and the president liked him and took him into the staff and my dad lived in the palace. My mother was a war veteran from World War II and had gone through so many things I don't have time to tell you but she was severely wounded and came back to New York.

[00:15:53] She was kind of a blue blood you know a socialite and had a very hard time reconnecting with her culture and ended up going to San Francisco with some of the other Red Cross ladies. And

she was a jewelry buyer for the Magnin stores. And if you knew my mother you knew that she was perfect to buy jewelry for a company because she loved a nice ring you know and she was kind of a late Victorian. She was also from Southern Star because the family had come from England way back when and settled in Virginia.

[00:16:29] So my mom if you can imagine first on a dirt street in Tijuana and then in Barrio Logan in San Diego this lady out of place little wet gloves Charmbracelet. Every place she'd ever been clinking clanking one string of pearls a little black dress.

[00:16:49] Sometimes she wore a little hat with even a string veil she held her hand up in the air as she taugh she liked to smoke just for effect.

[00:17:01] I learned later she was imitating Bette Davis you know hundred cigarettes had lipstick on them and if you said something witty she'd take a puff and say oh darling and my dad had run afoul of the federal government in Mexico and left Mexico City and came to one. Another reason my family was in Tijuana was my grandfather Juan was a thirty third degree Mason Fenny Masonic brothers are here fill me in on some of the secrets. And he was a Rosicrucian and he had gone to start one of the lodges. And so my dad went to their house. He had fallen in love with my mother in San Francisco because he had gone on missions for the government and he romanced her and they were married in City Hall in San Francisco.

[00:17:58] But I think my dad sort of failed to explain that he was no longer on the presidential staff. So my poor mom of blue blooded but she was going to Mexico City. She thought she was going to live on the rare hacienda and she thought there would be Charles and mariachis right.

[00:18:23] Maybe Anthony Quinn was going to be there. Maybe Gilbert Roland was going to be there. She had no idea what was going to happen. And my dad took her to Tijuana

[00:18:36] Outhouses in a dirt street and she didn't know what to make of it. What do I do. So I come along. I was born on the road to the dog track.

[00:18:48] It's still there it's a little Patika the room you can see and I loved the one in the corner was heaven. There was nothing better than Tijuana I'm telling you all the propaganda you've heard for the last 75 years.

[00:19:06] When I ruled it was where all the music was swor all the food was where the dogs were made.

[00:19:15] Ts where were my grandma was and you know fresh tortillas and they would send me up the street. I thought competitive. Yes. And they give me some money. And I go up there and you could hear it first and then you could smell it and I'd go into the room. There were four or six Mahy Kandice I'll confess it was like the beginning of my erotic life because. I was six years old looking at these women and I was thinking sultry goddesses you shall be mine

[00:19:56] Like I'm going to marry all of you wait for me. I will catch up.

[00:20:02] And they were so cute with me. I mean home. I went to authorities. Yeah yeah I do.

[00:20:12] And they give the tortilla with a little salt and I'd eat it or they'd put butter on it or lemon juice and it was heaven.

[00:20:21] Right. So we moved to the bathroom and there wasn't a whole lot of fun. And my parent my father was heartbroken. I think you cannot be a guest of Southern California especially in the 50s early 60s. There's a man he can know and feel very welcome in a very hard time. And he had gone from a life of accomplishment to cleaning bathrooms in the bowling alley that broke his heart. But he was dignified and he was disciplined he was a military man.

[00:21:03] My father taught himself English by memorizing the dictionary five pages a week studying the dictionary.

[00:21:16] And unfortunately for me sometimes I had to give him his English exams. And if you have. And we make the Gunung Papalii in me. I know who's sitting at the table furiously smoking a pell mell answers and then let me call them and examine somebody.

[00:21:35] And you'd be like the head OK.

[00:21:38] What's an aardvark and he'd be like Kotche and then he tried to describe it.

[00:21:44] It's got a long nose.

[00:21:46] It eats bugs as a good we left the barrio and moved up to a little working class burb called Clairemont which is where I went to Claremont High. One of my high school goddesses is here Vickie she can tell you all kinds of things about what I was like.

[00:22:07] I leave first though and something happened.

[00:22:14] And what happened was I found out that people had really harsh opinions about us. I didn't know I came out of Tijuana with my accent.

[00:22:28] I spoke Spanish Bifröst bookings. I was learning Spanglish them.

[00:22:34] So like to me at Byck was when Hobeika truck was broke. A wife was when my wife and

[00:22:46] End piece of cake was in KCI wasn't past that except the old ladies like to use diminutives for everything so they Culham Seattle peanut butter was peanut butter so I get to our neighborhood and I suddenly start hearing things about Mexico.

[00:23:08] They're dirty.

[00:23:08] You know are border crossers the women are all whores you know they smoke cigarettes made out of horse dung. I was like Are you serious.

[00:23:25] So I didn't know what to do. I joined the Boy Scouts.

[00:23:29] I thought this is going to be my new life because I tell you what in Barrio Logan you don't camp a lot. You don't hike a lot. You run but in those days you didn't hike. So I went up to hike and do boyscout stuff and I came home and my dad hated it. He's looking at me as like me. Cole says don't send my uniform he said me call.

[00:23:52] You're wearing shorts and I said yeah and he said you cut green knee socks on.

[00:24:00] I said Yeah dad and he said Mikol if you want to be a man join the army. And I was like I'm in fifth grade.

[00:24:10] Anyway I realized that that little moment that happens to you is would probably fuels much of why I write.

[00:24:22] And that was fifth grade in the bathroom with all my new white boyfriends. The bat patrol of troop 260 all my buddies and me in the boys bathroom and they didn't know what my name was. They thought it was weird so they'd call me urin urethra diarrhea and unreal and I thought unreal was pretty cool because even then I thought Yemen to be a rock star or something so unreal I was going to join the Monte's right and given one of the guys says to me hey in real you know what you are house play along. They know what am I. You're a greaser man. I said Okay. Can you say you're a greaser went back and all of my friends started laughing at me. Back Greece or went back to Greece or went back Greece or. And then they walked out and I just stood there and I was convinced in the bottom of my soul that we had Greece on us and couldn't see it only you guys could see and it broke my heart. Even worse because I honest to God took off my shirt and was trying to find it and I couldn't find. So here's where being a writer comes in. And then I'll tell you about this book I go home. My dad worked late night shift and he waited for me to come home every afternoon. And he was always drinking coffee and you'll see in my book if you haven't read it yet.

[00:26:01] Oldskool me. Love instant coffee. I don't know what it is.

[00:26:07] Right. They don't want Star Books. No they Nescafé cause I come back dig deep.

[00:26:14] I grew up with deep that was my dad. He's drinking coffee and I walked in and he said what's the matter. Immediately I said nothing. Why not get the parcel. Not that you know who it is having a kid right.

[00:26:29] Michael Jackson could have returned from the dead at school and the kid could come home and say how is it that what happened to school today. No. So then they go turn on TV. I was at work but I didn't want my father to know what had just happened. Partially because he was so meek.

[00:26:45] I was afraid he was going to say Michael you're going to go back to the school you're going to find each one of those guys you're going to beat them and understanding the last one up back up you know. So I was like I hope I didn't want him to know.

[00:26:59] And he said you looked depressed. What's the matter. And I said Oh they called me a name. He said really what are they calling they call me. Research their and he sat there my dad had this habit when he was smoking was going to say something he would take a puff of the cigarette and hold it up and tip his head back. And then usually say obscenity you know but he just tipped his head back to me. Now a classic moment of fatherhood said Michael in the western expansion across the United States.

[00:27:36] Emily Gunnels came in covered wagon and was like what great dad.

[00:27:45] Yeah yeah. No no. He called me to the wagons were made of wood.

[00:27:54] Lies like a hawk.

[00:27:57] Yes. So he cut the as they came across from Boston they got about his first day. And the friction of the axles heated up the wagons say his cycle and time on and the wagons burst into flames. And the bull was gringos lost everything everything burned in Texas. What the hell was I Yeah.

[00:28:29] And he said and the only people sophisticated enough to have the technology to grease axles around me.

[00:28:37] He can go to he said so if they call you that name.

[00:28:46] Hold your head up there too ignorant to know the term cried me while and off he went to the bowling alley and I knew he was lying.

[00:28:59] But how can you take words and change the worst day of someone's life and one of the nicest memories ever. How do you transform somebody. I thought about my dad forever just because of that moment.

[00:29:16] It was weird but it was brilliant.

[00:29:19] So I was the first person in my family to go to college and I really always wanted to write.

[00:29:30] I wrote and I wrote I wrote in junior high and high school. I wrote my way through college. I thought people from Tijuana didn't get to publish books. But I couldn't stop myself mostly because I wanted to write love poems to my girlfriend. But you know writing I didn't have money. I had no skills. I couldn't play sports. I didn't have nice shoes and nice clothes I was never going to have a car.

[00:29:58] But I could write I did that and my father died during my senior year.

[00:30:08] Of college and it was awful. I won't go into a lot of terrible things that happened in Mexico and after he was gone I didn't know what to do except to write and I wrote a piece about my father's death and Ursula Kaela Gwyn's science fiction author came to my school as a visiting scholar found the piece took me into her workshop and then began to train me in how to be a real author and then published it.

[00:30:38] So I just want you to know my father made the ultimate sacrifice.

[00:30:47] That gave me everything of value in my life started my writing career before he met my mom.

[00:30:58] He had another family and those siblings are all together in San Diego now they lived in Mexico City and then they came up into San Diego. And the eldest brother of that clan was my brother Juan Juan Raya and one and I have always had a very interesting interrelated Brotherhood even though they were all over there and I was up here with my American mom.

[00:31:31] So I was the only child and the baby over here and there were all these siblings over there that I didn't see very of but one love to read and one would go find my dad at my grandmother's house and give him books to take to me. That's how I found Ray Bradbury. He was a science fiction fiend and Ray Bradbury came to my house and I started reading it and I thought oh so fueled my mania even more so over the years. Kwan and I have had this beautiful thing and one always exhorted me to do what I was doing. You're going to have meaning you're going to do something with your life. And it didn't look like it for a while until Don't ask me to explain this because it's one of those weird miracles that are inexplicable. I was hired in 1982 to go teach writing at Harvard. I don't know what happened but I it was Grace. You know some weird thing and my family got together to say farewell to Luis Luis's moving away. Right. And Juan was trying to process this writing. You're going to teach writing. Yeah.

[00:32:48] So he stood up to the family said Familia Louise's handwriting is so beautiful.

[00:32:57] Clarence recalls almost creepy. And I was like No no no no.

[00:33:03] Sometimes it is it's like workshops man. But he said this blessing to me that I have it makes me laugh to this day he said everybody dances our Luis goes from free holis to Boston baked beans he was right. So years later we're living in the Chicago area.

[00:33:30] You know I have three kids. My youngest daughter Chinle and I. She's my sidekick home. We're always doing stuff and we like to go on river walks. We have a river going through town or we used to. She's 18 now so she pretty much likes to sleep. But back when she was younger she liked to take long walks and we were walking and my cell phone rang and I looked and it was from the grass and I don't know if you like me but if you get an unexpected call from family you think oh oh oh no. Right. And I took it and it was my niece deal. I said Yeah what's going on. My dad wants to talk to you. I thought that was really weird and I said OK. Mine was quiet and he said Kamali Hey whine what's up and he said I have some NEWS for you. And I said What. He said I have cancer and I said yes. I remember sitting down on a stone wall in the woods and I said cancer really is and he said how bad is it. It's pretty bad. It's bladder cancer. I've got a lot of tumors.

[00:34:37] Colonel and they've been trying to cut him out. I didn't know what to do you know. And I said you know said my publisher got me to join this new thing called Facebook.

[00:34:53] And he said yeah and I said Yeah. It's like people talk on it.

[00:34:56] I said but I've noticed that when people have a problem they ask people to pray for them on Facebook.

[00:35:02] You want me to do that he said yes Governor I would like to do that for me. So I put it up on Facebook said My brother is sick. Could you you know and he got about 100 125 which if you knew my brother knew his pride and ego he was so happy he he's like a hundred and twenty five of us are praying for me and that is right.

[00:35:27] And he went into remission. So those of you who know our families know that that means that suddenly Luis is dead. All right. Luis made a miracle happened.

[00:35:41] He got better and then he got sick again. More cancer it moved around his butt. And so now it was a bit of a ritual he said. Garnon put it up again. I said OK OK. And I had more people because the books were coming out and they formed a group they called Team 1. There might be Team 1 people here. And they made a logo.

[00:36:07] 350 people praying for him Catholics do we know Vinos right. Protestants you know go into the Lord atheists sending him positive thoughts and light

[00:36:27] Some Wiccan friends were out you know pray and under the moon naked. He like that.

[00:36:34] It was amazing. And he went into remission again. And the third time he got ill he had tumors in his and we were on tour I live on tour pretty much much of the year and we were driving around California and he was in ICU. It was the end and we had to go into the hospital and he was very tiny which I had never seen before and gone it seemed to me and he was lying in bed and he was seeing dead people I drive in and mirror mirror and was a little girl he kept saying I've niña.

[00:37:14] I said good kid. I don't know what she was. She just comes in and stares at me and he thought he had a cup of coffee and he would drink it and look at me and I had to go and I sat on the bed with him and he would get lucid. You know he came to his senses and he looked at me and I said Colonel I'm on tour. I have to go and do a performance.

[00:37:42] And I I think I should call it off and stay with you he said no no you have to go do this.

[00:37:50] It's your job we work. You work go do your job and I just I cried honestly.

[00:38:00] Cindy my wife drove and I was just really upset. And off we went. And about a week later my phone rang and I thought OK. Steel yourself because I know what this is you know and I answered it is my niece Hadeel give me the news.

[00:38:20] What news. The news. But you're dead. What about it.

[00:38:27] I said Milly how is your dad.

[00:38:32] And she said oh no he's cool. He's at home he's fine. Forgive me for saying something like will he never die

[00:38:44] In a miracle and that's the way it went with 1 3 resurrections.

[00:38:51] But he got he was very tired and very sick. And the cancer had gotten into his bones and it was clear that he wouldn't be with us very long.

[00:39:01] So one of his granddaughters decided it would be really cool to give him his last birthday party on Earth. He was turning 74 and everybody knew.

[00:39:17] Nobody acknowledged it but everybody knew that this was a goodbye to one. He knew it was a very smart man. And like I told you a very strong ego. And I think one thought you know I can orchestrate my own wake and attended and direct it and sit at my own wake and hear what a bad ass I and he did. We went to this event that I have been describing on the road as the Mexican Finnegans Wake because every kind of make you know you've ever imagined or didn't was there once oldtimers from Mexico Chicanos ph DS gang bangers Cantet Black is cholos a bunch of Samoans.

[00:40:20] People are like yes. They come from are in the family.

[00:40:26] All at once filling my brother's yard. It looked like the wedding scene from The Godfather and I sat beside him. He was in his wheelchair and people came to him and they kiss his hand or they would kneel or they would touch him or kiss his head and just tell him all the things he had done and I got to see my brother finding out that so it was over for him and he hadn't had a perfect life and his family hadn't come out perfectly and he didn't have time to fix everything that he felt was wrong. He finds out in his last days of life that he's changed the world.

[00:41:09] Over and over and I finally turned to him it's in the book I said another. You're just like Don Corleone in The Godfather. And he said I don't Cordileone.

[00:41:25] So he got ill. During the party and he was very weak so he would have to go back to his bedroom and lie down in bed. And he called for me till McConnell to come see me. So I went down the hall and he was lying there in bed in his pajamas sweat socks and he said he had Manito right there. I said what. And he said get in bed. I said you want me to get in bed with you he said get in bed.

[00:41:55] So I climbed in bed with my brother and we were lying there a little awkwardly at first and he said to me a very haunting thing he said you know something he said if you turned 74 years old that means you've only seen Christmas morning 73 times in your whole life.

[00:42:19] He said it's not enough and I thought oh my now he's showing me his meds you know and telling me what it feels like all that and at one point he looks at me he says we've got know you are Gunnels kiss. I looked at him I said I can kiss like in the movies.

[00:42:46] He said no you know and families they kiss.

[00:42:54] I said yeah I've seen. Sure of course everybody kisses right you kiss your Mom and he said no no no mom don't count because if you don't kiss your Mom you go to hell.

[00:43:07] I said Oh yeah you're right. Now I've seen everybody you know not all families kids. But yeah and I looked at him and he was just he had this huge burning eyes. He was watching me and I said Wait you want me to kiss you. And he's like no number. Yeah.

[00:43:29] I'd never even hug them.

[00:43:32] Give me a kiss on the forehead. Burning hot. And then we lay back down. He was like I was OK. Now that was all right. Were and the party went on and all this amazing stuff happened. And at the end of the night it was time to leave. I of course had to go on tour. I was going to northern Arizona and Dallas and I was pretty sure I'd never see him again. And he was in bed again. And I went back to his room and he was lying there in bed. And he said Don't say goodbye. And I said OK. And he said Don't ever say goodbye to me. And I said well what do I say. He said Tell me you'll see me next time. I took his hand and I said I will see you next time. And we just looked at each other and he nodded this last time my son was in Dallas when he died. But a week later I had to come back and we buried so I did not know what to do with this but I told you the example earlier of my father's death I thought well maybe I can write in my notebooks. I never imagined this thing. But my wife kept telling me this is an American epic kind of thing I say you're crazy. It's just a story of my family burying their dad. I mean what is the story. I don't see a story in it. And she is telling me this is you've got to write this you've got to write this a couple of weeks later. I was fortunate enough to do an event with Jim

Harrison the novelist and poet who had been a hero of mine. And he he knew some about this and he said to me at dinner tell me about your brother's death.

[00:45:20] So I told him the whole story. And he said to me sometimes God hands you a novel you'd better write it. So I thought wow marching orders from my hero and my wife who probably hit me with a chunk if I don't do it.

[00:45:38] So I started working on it and it turned into this novel is fictionalized but I think you'll see a lot of the stuff while I was working on the novel the idiocy of the American political scene started getting more and more toxic and I got more and more mad. And so you know not to upset anybody in here but I think the subtitle is go to hell Donnell and you just have to tell you last night this tour has been crazy.

[00:46:17] The reviews have been wonderful. A lot of stuff has happened that I can't tell you about. Really. Movie deal and

[00:46:31] It just seems like people in the country are tired of this stuff. And you know I am so sick of this crap I'm so sick of walls and Bad Brains and rapists and killers.

[00:46:46] I so love sent Fox insulting the crap out of somebody of Twitter.

[00:46:54] So I did not want to and I want to say this is not against conservative people. My parents are super conservative and I want you all to know that I have finally grown up. I've finally matured and for the first time in my life one of the heroes is a respectable Republican instead of me loving Democrats only. So my first Republican hero too.

[00:47:15] But I just couldn't take it anymore. And part of my life is the the one of the previous books into the beautiful North is in any way being read book and all over the country. Whole cities and whole school districts are reading this book and my job. Much of the year is going to talk to hundreds of Latin acts Mexicano whatever you want to call us kids and they come in and they're afraid. I'm telling you they're heartbroken. They're embarrassed.

[00:48:00] They flinch.

[00:48:03] They feel tiny. I know because I had grease on my back.

[00:48:09] I know what they feel like. Guess what. All of a sudden it's God's sense of humor that I'm their first author. And I'm talking to these kids and I'm trying to make them see that it's OK that we are beautiful that this is important that we belong here.

[00:48:26] My relatives I have relatives who are Apache's I have relatives who are a yachties and Mios. They were always here.

[00:48:35] So I start talking to those kids and they don't want to. They're very you know. So I explained to them said you got to study history. See what happened to Irish immigrants. See what happened to German immigrants. You want to see some really great. Build the wall rhetoric. Check out Ben Franklin talking about Germans. Oh Chinese people Jewish people Italians. So I tell the kids because kids like to laugh. And you try to be funny. So I tell them I promise you this thing that's happening right now.

[00:49:11] It's just a light house beam that circulates and it keeps falling on your right now. But mark my words by the time you're my age it's going to be somebody else. Some president is going to be really pissed off at Norwegian's

[00:49:29] And they're going to be like stop the Vikings build the wall up the East Coast the United States or stop the Vikings and the kids finally laugh you know because it's it's good.

[00:49:43] I had I had an entire class take a bus to the tattered cover in Denver of Mexican kids. All of this stuff is great. That's better.

[00:49:58] And the teacher wrote to me and said you know what one of the students said to me I'm just small. I have a small life. But tonight I feel big and I want every kid to hear every kid. So it's all about families. Just happens to be our families but American fare you know and I keep trying to tell people it's about Grace it's about it doesn't matter it doesn't matter if you've made mistakes.

[00:50:28] Doesn't matter if you're angry at somebody it doesn't matter if you've seen it doesn't matter what your lifestyle choices are what your needs are or what your gender is in the family it doesn't matter if you're straight or gay it doesn't matter because we are a family and we are only here this long. I hope we're lucky enough to see 73 Christmas morning it's not that long.

[00:50:57] So that's what the book was about.

[00:51:00] And I fictionalized because I didn't want to be in trouble with all of my family. So most of the people in it are made up but a lot of the incidents you will recognize is real.

[00:51:12] And last night in San Diego my family came for the first time to hear about the book and my brother's widow came. She's never come to see me but and it was pretty cool. I was terrified because if I could be in trouble they were like Loizzo. So I tried to make sure to tell a little story about each of them to the audience and they could not believe that everybody loves my brother.

[00:51:42] He was saying to me Lisa there's thousands of Americans who live and I know he's really happy wherever he is right now.

[00:51:51] But I said they love you. The country started to love you guys are like him right.

[00:51:56] Yeah. You know so I thought before I do questions I'll give you a little chapter.

[00:52:04] I know it sounds like if you read this book you're going to need to hang yourself. It's not like that I promise. There's a lot of sex in it but it's married sex. And I think the young folks are going to be really grossed out because everybody's like 60 they'll be like ooh what are you doing.

[00:52:29] And there's a lot of bad behavior and a lot of I think I hope humor. I never I don't go in any political screeds don't worry.

[00:52:38] But I just want the atmosphere of enough's enough to be quite present tense. So here's a little chapter.

[00:52:48] It's one of the funny ones I've cut it down because I know I've probably gone way too long. But later in the book you will see the chapter called parrots and I have been telling this story in different forms on stage before but it was inspired by a time when my own grandma Guadalupe and Murray decided to turn gangster and do a little border smuggling and I've never forgotten it. So I put it in the book because it comes at a moment when you need some laughter. And the two brothers have this memory that they share when they want to laugh. It's called Peritz and the setup is very simple.

[00:53:26] Big Angel is the one who's dying.

[00:53:30] Little angel is his half brother. They were both named Angel because dad was a player and forgot he used the name once before.

[00:53:44] Big Angel's mom is in Tijuana.

[00:53:47] Mama America and every month she comes to San Diego to inspect everybody's house disapprovingly. You know just plain stupid. They're so dingy you know that all your parts to bed. They're kind of yellow. They kind of inspect. And dad sends big Angel to get her but because dad is afraid little angel is turning to America and he sends the boy along to get a little dose of Mexicans. So they go down to their house together to pick her up. Big Angel has his green card.

[00:54:19] Now little angels in fifth grade reading MAD Magazine and Batman and stuff driving his big brother crazy his big brother is already exhausted by the United States and is starting to chain smoke and he doesn't want to go get his mom because she's such a pain. This is where we pick it up or skip all of that.

[00:54:38] You heard it from memory for you.

[00:54:42] Big Angel drove the old Rambler the Rampa. It was a dirt street full of boulders you had to go slowly because if you hit those boulders too hard they would tear the oil pan out of the bottom of the car he pulled up to my mother's yellow house on the side of the hill and parked. There was a 6 foot high cement wall in front and stuck in the top of the wall were broken pieces of Pepsi Cola bottles in case any Pachuco came along and wanted to steal her girdles.

[00:55:15] The boys went through the gate and into the house.

[00:55:18] She wasn't inside anywhere but in the corner. Stood the wrought iron cage of the parent every Mexican family in those days had a green parrot and this parrot sat in the corner. Day after day staring at itself in the mirror it was an egomaniac.

[00:55:40] So it reminded itself of its name.

[00:55:42] They had named it after themselves Paty Ito de la Cruz so he would look in the mirror and say that he thought Iquito but Iquito Iquito he thought but he Mamá came out of her bedroom with a little canvas bag of clothing and a red pocketbook and stopped.

[00:56:05] She said I pity because of my. She said. So I was Mikol.

[00:56:16] I told you before we could have a Navy SEAL we could take any Titos from one sell them in San Diego for a hundred times more than we paid for them in Tijuana because most borders Mahy Gunnels don't have Peritz up there. And you said my MA I told you already a hundred times. It's illegal to take Peritz into San Diego. The boys should have thought it was a harbinger when mom said we'll see

[00:56:55] It went out and got in the Rambler and began to drive back down the hill very slow and my mom said Well yeah. I want you to take me to the fruit market before we go to the border he said.

[00:57:09] My I told you.

[00:57:12] Also it's illegal to take fruit into the United States she said.

[00:57:18] Who said anything about fruit. I only asked to go to the market me.

[00:57:22] I look at the legal OK Mom said I take you to the market so instead of going west he went a little east to the fruit market in Tijuana a very famous location. A series of old buildings surrounding a parking lot inside the parking lot trucks full of sugar cane bananas oranges onions men without shirts with rags tied on their heads carrying hundred pound sacks of recoilless. The blacktop with with inch sheer lack of juice and potato skins ground into the black hole big Angel pulled in and park the Rambler and got out his little brother got out.

[00:58:08] Mama America reached back in as she got out and picked up her little red pocketbook and closed her door and went off walking.

[00:58:17] The boys felt a creeping sense of terror when they realized she was walking to a corner that had a sign that said Bird salesman little angel said are we in trouble.

[00:58:32] Big Angel said. I don't know.

[00:58:34] Wisco seen they walked over to the corner where the bird salesman was and now my America put her pocketbook down on the workbench and said Hobin Hovan Binger.

[00:58:46] She said Do you have a very sweet little Paquito and thought raised by hand. The sweetest. I need the sweetness of the gay you. I raised him by hand. They were very tame. Bring me the most. Would you please. He went inside. He came back out with a very sweet little bit of meat on his finger. He transferred it to her finger. She looked at him and then she began this semi demented thing that old Mexican women do this very charming talk that they give to children kittens parrots me give it up.

[00:59:33] Then she started making weird clicking noises.

[00:59:37] The parrot got all excited with himself puffed up a little bit his little head feathers moved up he began to pose as she was saying these things.

[00:59:48] He opened her little pocket book and she pulled out a bottle and she laid it on the counter kept talking and unscrewed the lid and they saw to their horror that it was an eye dropper and she took the eyedropper and started tapping his big teeth.

[01:00:07] But he opened his mouth as she dropped three drops of clear liquid into his mouth. Screw the lid back on and look back at the boys and said it's Bikila and the parrot plink and begin looking around and Swade on her finger a little and. Started really swaying and

[01:00:35] Pretty soon passed out and fell backwards and she caught him. He had his feet in the air and he was snoring little parrot snores.

[01:00:44] So she laid him gently on the bench. The three males were standing there watching. They've never seen anything like this. And she opened her pocketbook and she took out a sheet of newspaper and she laid it down next to the bird. And then she gently laid the bird on his back on the newspaper and started to roll him up

[01:01:04] His tail down and the pointy end and she held it up it looked like a parrot flavored snow cone and this horrified all three boys.

[01:01:16] By pulling open the top of her dress with her thumb.

[01:01:24] She moved them all the way and adjusted herself and said the school doesn't.

[01:01:34] So the border in those days was not the same as the border we see now. It was not high tech. It was a series of wooden shacks with board and hot U.S. federal agents sitting there. There were no computers there are no such thing as cell phones. They had a dial up telephone. They had a

tight list of license plate numbers of evil doers that they had to watch for all day and if they saw one they had to quickly dial and say he's here Angel was driving very carefully very worried.

[01:02:10] Little angel was in the back convinced they were going to federal prison.

[01:02:16] Momma America was cool collected sitting next to big angel in the passenger seat.

[01:02:24] They started pulling up to shake from the back seat.

[01:02:29] All little angel could see the American agent was his stomach.

[01:02:34] As he stood up the pants filled the window. The had moved in a huge red face came down and looked in and said oh go Tennesse propel us

[01:02:53] Big Angel said greencard.

[01:02:56] All right buddy. Send your

[01:02:59] Ticket.

[01:03:02] Lisa All right. He looked back. Papers. I'm a U.S. citizen.

[01:03:14] He stood back up. And then he asked the traditional question.

[01:03:19] The people from Tijuana I used to get for every cartload Tenares Chinen Lee KOR And El Caro everyone crossing the border had a trunk full of liquor and every driver said no Senor and the agent say Okay work them to the United States and they would drive it ass big Angel denied.

[01:03:50] He was satisfied and the stomach began to Rootie. Little angel watched it.

[01:03:56] It reached the three quarter mark and he knew they had pulled off the crime except when it got this far out of the window. The parrot woke up so was turning and suddenly. And then it protested. The stomach turned back everybody froze

[01:04:22] The red face went back down in the window and started looking around the car. At that moment my bust began to move and there were noises coming out and she looked at him and she said isn't this interesting.

[01:04:49] Ten years later little angel went to the movies. And he saw a movie that reminded him of this day.

[01:04:58] It was called Alien suddenly this creature rose out of her dress a green head.

[01:05:11] She was leaning back and she said I don't even know what's happening. And it burst out poof

[01:05:19] And started flying around the inside of the car screaming feathers flying everywhere.

[01:05:24] Everyone gasped except my mom Mika who is always elegant.

[01:05:31] She calmly rolled down the passenger window smiling at the aged and in that moment two boys my.

[01:05:43] The U.S. federal agent watched that bird fly illegally across the border going that's my sorry thank you I know there's probably good stuff on TV you're missing it so if there are any questions I'll answer them quickly and then I'll go over there if you want me to sign anything and I shout anything.

[01:06:13] Don't be shy. You can probably tell I will talk about any How did I decide.

[01:06:21] She said. How do you decide if it's going to be nonfiction or fiction. I initially was going to try to write a nonfiction but I just couldn't do it. And one of my models was Truman Capote. I loved him when I was younger and he had those little tiny books. Truman Capote fans might remember Thanksgiving memory Christmas memory little thin like 100 pages look like poetry books. And I thought I would do that. And honestly I sent that to my publisher and they asked What is this I says my next book and they said no it isn't.

[01:06:57] And so it started expanding and changing and transforming and I didn't want to you know you feel it takes a lot of hubris to write the story of your family's life. But if you can if you can replace it with fiction and I found myself doing.

[01:07:15] Every time I visited San Diego to save myself I would do instant writers workshop kind of like ours was you know and I'd be like you're in a Kinton there always is making a movie in his mind inspired by you and sometimes you do in the movie in his head but it's not about you and the whole family looked like him but they started to get and they're really digging it and everybody is claiming the characters. Oh yeah I know who should play me in them are you

[01:07:52] As somebody else you know.

[01:07:55] But that was just the decision to try to be able to tell a story and universalize it and it just didn't feel like I could I could own that.

[01:08:05] So I don't know all the details in their life.

[01:08:09] He and his wife especially so I just I decided to do the yes oh yeah.

[01:08:18] Do I have a role model or author or books that influenced my writing so many. It's almost impossible to list them. My wife always says I'm a coward because I can't answer that question. I can't those you know I can go back my whole life. I mentioned Ray Bradbury. Mark Twain was a big influence on me when I was a little kid. You know Neruda. When I first read that one rule for that I love mysteries. Now that's what I read.

[01:08:51] My wife is kind of a literary snob so I read mysteries she's reading a great book and I'm reading you know where bad guys get shot by the good guy. Yes. I love those I love poetry a lot. So I'm I'm especially crazy for Asian poetry.

[01:09:09] I love haiku poetry. They have a huge library at home and I never stop. So it changes.

[01:09:19] You know I was I was in love with stories from the start and I still find authors today that make me crazy. But the difference is I am so lucky.

[01:09:32] They let me join the club you know you go and you're doing stuff with your heroes.

[01:09:39] That's amazing to me. I'm still a fan.

[01:09:43] I haven't figured out how to be really cool like they are I'm just like oh my god. So lots and lots of writers and I this will sound like I'm cheating but it's never that I have.

[01:09:56] So trying to answer that question for people that I've made a list seriously for my for my website for my blog women writers and poets men writers and poets. And it keeps getting longer and longer and longer. But I'm going to stop sooner or later I'm just going to stop and say here's 150 women change my life and here's 150 men that changed my life.

[01:10:23] See this thing that is I don't know. You know it's. But but a lot a lot.

[01:10:32] Yeah. I have command of everything.

[01:10:37] You know what happens to me which is interesting. My mom never learned Spanish. I don't know how this worked out. Oh you didn't. They didn't last but my mother only spoke English. She tried to cuss in Spanish and she couldn't. That's all she ever learned.

[01:10:55] Ok lah for Gondo she would say it's and my dad had learned English but he loved Spanish and the house was a constant war between the two. And it was a cultural war between the two which I hated then but I'm thankful for now because it made me think twice. And my mother expected perfect English at all times and my father expected perfect Spanish at all times and he would he was harder than my mom because the musicality of Spanish he wanted the right accent.

[01:11:34] He wanted the right intonation. He didn't want me to sound like you know somebody speaking Spanglish. He didn't approve of that. So it was a constant test interestingly when I went to see a lawyer for the first time.

[01:11:53] I had no idea that I spoke norteño Spanish. The scena loans were like What are you a cowboy.

[01:12:02] I thought it was all sophisticated.

[01:12:04] You know and it's funny for me.

[01:12:10] I don't know how it works for you but when I'm in Mexico two days I start dreaming in Spanish. I realize I dream in English except once in a while like I dream about relatives or something. But as soon as I go across the border I start dreaming in Spanish and then I'm writing everything in Spanish. And if I'm there for example for my father's funeral and all the awful things that go into that happened around it.

[01:12:38] When I came back I'd forgotten how to speaking.

[01:12:44] And my best friend a guy named Rick was waiting for me. That's a true friend. He said at my house waiting for me to get back from Tijuana. And he thought I was joking because I was trying to this was beat like my brother you know like go to get me. And he started laughing because I had lost my English because of the trauma. So I've tried to learn to just flow with it and let it just happen. And I think in my mind there are coequal. You know they just it's a real relief to me. And it's it's a joy to me to speak Spanish because every time I do I feel like I've gone on a vacation.

[01:13:32] And I'm going to tell you everyday. Gunnoe is my primo. No matter where I go if I speak Spanish. All barriers drop well first. If it's a restaurant and I say oh let me go. They look at me and I say no no no I'm not with ice.

[01:13:49] It's not the border patrol so why not.

[01:13:52] Oh but sometimes people look at me like oh but when we speak there is this connection this bridge that is so beautiful that I can't explain. And I don't know what that means but it's so cool. So yeah I just try to I just try to let it flow. And I think if you think about it too much when I was younger and I was trying to constantly think about it it got very difficult for but in college that's when I started really reading Spanish. Reading Borges and pass of course Nehru and Gabriel Strads one rule for Maria and elsewhere. All that stuff I didn't even know it existed until I got to call. So it was it was. It took a little while to figure out how to drive the machine.

[01:14:54] Yeah what's funny to me about several of my books like Hummingbird's Daughter the beautiful North Queen of America. They're all in Spanish. I did translate them into English to actually write them. Everybody speaking Spanish. So I had to try to find a way to write English that exudes

Mexican enUS which accidentally became my style and usually what happens is then I'll be on a tour like this. And the press suddenly decides that's to be translated and I have you know like one week to translate 700 pages and I just can't do it and I was talking to some of the consuls tonight. My cousin Enrique Enrique Hubbard thank you very much.

[01:15:40] This is the Mexican ambassador and a political writer and so forth. And at the time Hummingbird's Daughter had just come out and San Francisco was the first place to pick me as an all city read. But San Francisco being very forward thinking I think like Seattle had some rules they wanted it in paperback or they wouldn't do it because people couldn't afford it and they wanted it in Spanish or they wouldn't do it.

[01:16:06] So the publisher immediately put it in paperback but they were like Luis you got to translate it. I said they want it in less than a month and I wrote two weeks and I said yes. I'm dying here.

[01:16:19] And I said and it's about people from Sinaloa and you all think I talk like George Bush. So how am I going to get the Sinaloa or Spanish there.

[01:16:28] And he said don't worry Premal it's OK. Send me the manuscript and I'll take notes. Any. You will write.

[01:16:38] Well I didn't understand no comment on my beloved consuls here that political figures are driven people right and can sometimes type A personalities so seriously in three weeks 700 pages came back he translated the entire book and I thought I don't have to do it and I sent it to the publisher and they sent him 30000 bucks so he was like wait this is great.

[01:17:07] So you know Enrique started asking me when's our next project. Oh

[01:17:14] You know he was my go to guy when I'm under pressure.

[01:17:18] So that answer yeah oh yeah.

[01:17:27] Yeah you have to find ways around it. You know you have to find ways to tell it. Sometimes you can sometimes you just have to leave it in the language it is and people figure it out. People are pretty smart you know.

[01:17:43] Junot Diaz once people were complaining that he has too much Spanish in his books and he said What is it about you people that you'll read 300 pages in Elvish in a fantasy novel. But you won't read Spanish for two and

[01:17:59] It is funny to me that a lot of times very sincere readers get spanish english dictionaries and try to go through my books. And they'll write to me say I didn't find those words Sebs because they really felt they people were cursing. But some things you know I think the problem is trying to forge a a sisterhood in a brotherhood and a family relationship where are quibbles and our details are

good things not some invasively disturbing thing. And you know up here my wife's from Burian been coming up here for many many 20 some years with her. And I knew the world was changing. When we were in Burian and we went to the drugstore and were sitting in the car and I hear this little between girl and getting naging.

[01:18:57] And I started looking around like what is happening and a guy like the border between our guys are selling stuff came around the corner and he had about six little tiny guitars and a sombrero I was like Are you kidding me. And he started yelling get the 20 dollars guitar. Twenty dollars. And a woman came out of Walgreens.

[01:19:23] It was like you're out of your mind. I spent 20 dollars on a stupid little Mexican guitar and he looked he said get tired of fifteen dollars.

[01:19:38] I was in love with a guy.

[01:19:42] So I think you know I think if you write the book well or the story well and it's kind of clear who the people are what they're trying to say. Maybe it'll translate.

[01:19:51] But there are things that are really difficult sometimes to have to pitch one more.

[01:19:59] I'm getting the science he told I was going to.

[01:20:01] Yes. What brings me joy.

[01:20:05] My family you know my wife and I we tour together partially because I just don't think I can do it anymore on my own. But also because it gives us 248 second honeymoons.

[01:20:20] You know I like that a lot. I like music a lot.

[01:20:28] I like to read. I like to teach. I complain about it but I like to teach anything creative. Makes me happy. The Pacific Northwest makes me really happy.

[01:20:43] Is that close. Jeff Wooleen is yeah yeah yeah.

[01:20:48] I like having eaten it because I felt like I was so adventuresome Yeah. She wouldn't kiss me though. Cindy was like you get little leg sticking out of your teeth as. ROY

[01:21:02] That's what brings me joy. So I should go. All right.

[01:21:08] Thank you so much.

[01:21:20] 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.