



Library podcast

Seattle Reads: 'Homegoing:' A conversation with Yaa Gyasi

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[00:00:35] Good evening I'm empty I'm your chief librarian and we're so happy to have you here for this night. Seattle reads as we begin this evening I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Duwamish people.

[00:00:47] So together let's also honor their elders past and present. We thank them for the stewardship of this land. With that I would like to just ask one quick question how many of you are still reading

[00:01:03] I have never read the last 80 pages so fast in my life. I am still reading so I am hopeful.

[00:01:14] But anyway tonight we have the pleasure of hearing from your Jesse the author of our very special 20th anniversary Seattle Reetz selection home going y'all will be in conversation with Vivian Phillips an esteemed leader in Seattle's arts community. But first I want to say just a few words about the Seattle Reetz program the shared experience of reading a book as a community brings people together in powerful and unexpected ways. In fact these experiences have proven so valuable that hundreds of One Book One City community reading programs have been replicated all over the world. We are very proud that the concept originated here. The inspiration of Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi who began the program in 1998. 20 years later we are as excited as ever to share these stories conversations and experiences with all of you. I would like to thank our sponsors who makes Seattle reads possible the Wallace Foundation The Seattle Times for their generous promotional support of library programs and media sponsor KUOW FM. We are also grateful to this year's Community Partners the Northwest African American Museum the Black Heritage Society of Washington Langston and The Elliott Bay Book Company finally I want to offer a special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation and the thousands of people in our community who generously donate gifts to benefit our library. This private support makes Seattleites possible. In addition to the hundreds of free library programs and services every year foundation donors who are here with us tonight. Thank you so very very much. Now let me turn things over to Stecia Brandon. The literature and humanities program manager who directs her Seattle reads series to introduce the rest of the program. Thank you and keep reading.

[00:03:23] Thanks so much empty. Out of curiosity. Oh I think M.T. asked how many of you have had a chance to dip into home going oh my goodness. Yeah. It's like most of the people. It's amazing. That's great. So we often work with an artistic organization to create original work inspired by the Seattle Reid selection. I think many of you remember last year's wonderful group Northwest tap connection and we've worked with bookit repertory theater for years in the past. This year we're doing something a little bit different. We're working with the Green Party experience and Northwest African American Museum to host Agrio party at Nahm. At the end of June Agrio is a West African tradition where storytellers and musicians use their voices and instruments to preserve culture and tradition. Performers at the June 23 Green Party will include Nikita Oliver Tijoux Yarbrough and vitamin D aka a Derek Brown will be more information in our June events in vogue. But I just wanted to give you guys a heads up because it's definitely related to the Seattle wreathes. Event programming but it's happening a little bit later. Tonight's event will begin with a brief excerpt from home going read for us by Kemarre Bright a local poet then will enjoy an onstage conversation with Jessie and Vivian Phillips after their conversation. We'll have time for your questions. We have mikes and we'll come to you so we can pick you up for the recording that we're making after the Q and A ja will be signing books in the lobby at the end of the evening. The line will start near the door to our children's department run along that wall and behind the auditorium if necessary.

[00:04:59] And just to kind of use my flight attendant skills here. So it will start in the lobby. On the other side of this wall run along the other side of this wall.

[00:05:09] And then if necessary go into the gallery and I'll remind you of that at the end of the night to Jesse was born in Ghana and raised in Huntsville Alabama. She holds a B.A. in English from Stanford University and an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop where she held the dean's graduate research fellowship. An important new literary voice. Writing has been praised by National Book Award winner Tanya HASI coats as an inspiration and quote what happens when you pair a gifted literary mind to an epic task. In September 2016 she was chosen by coat's as one of the National Book Foundation's 5 Under 35 honorees. She'll talk tonight with Vivienne Phillips. Vivian is a veteran communications professional arts administrator and arts advocate. She most recently served as director of marketing and communications for Seattle theater group where she also represented T.G. to the Africa contemporary arts consortium and regularly facilitated the inclusion of contemporary art from Africa into the T.G. programming mix. Vivian is a three term chair of the Seattle Arts Commission and also a founding member of the historic Central Area Arts and Cultural District. Vivian frequently hosts or moderates conversations with artists authors and public figures and has produced award winning public affairs and arts programs for television. In her free time which I don't even believe that she has any free time. She serves on the boards of Langston and KUOW Public Radio. We'll begin tonight by hearing from Kemarre bright Kemarre is a St. Louis born poet focused on introspection and connection. From a personal and societal standpoint she has had work featured in publications released her poetry book emergence in 2016 and 2018. Jack Straw writing fellow she'll open our program this evening with a reading from Jessie's home going.

[00:07:12] Good evening everyone.

[00:07:16] I'm going to be reading two excerpts from fear in the story the night Afia ultra was born into the musky heat of fantasy land a fire raged through the woods just outside her father's compound. It moved quickly tearing a path for a day. It lived off the air it slept in caves and hid in trees. It burned up and threw unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind until it reached an Ashanti village there. It disappeared becoming one with the night fierce father Kobe Archer left his first wife Bob with the new baby so that he might survey the damage to his yams that most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families. Kobe had lost 70 yams and he felt each loss as a blow to his own family. He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned then fled would haunt him his children and his children's children for as long as the line continued when he came back into Barasat to find fear. The child of the night's fire shrieking into the air. He looked at his wife and said we will never again speak of what happened today. Fear grew older the summer after her third birthday Bhabha had her first son. The boy's name was Fifi and he was so fat that sometimes when Bob wasn't looking Ifill would roll him along the ground like a ball.

[00:08:50] The first day that Bob let a feel hold she accidentally dropped him the baby balanced on his buttocks landed on his stomach and looked up at everyone in the room confused as to whether or not he should cry. He decided against it but Baba who had been staring banku lifted her stirring stick and beat a fear across her bareback. Each time the stick lifted off the girl's body it would leave behind a hot sticky piece of banku that burned into her flesh. By the time Bahbah had finished Afia was covered with sores screaming and crying from the floor rolling this way and that on his belly Fifi's looked at Afia with his saucer eyes but made no sound. Kobe came home to find his other wives tending to his wounds and understood immediately what had happened. He and Baba fought well into the night if he could hear them through the thin walls of the hut where she lay on the floor drifting in and out of a feverish sleep in her dream. Kobe was a lion and Baba was a tree. The lion plucked the tree from the ground. Words stood and slammed it back down the tree stretched its branches and protest and the lion rip them off. One by one the tree horizontal began to cry.

[00:10:12] Red Ants that travelled down the thin cracks between its bark the ants poured on the soft earth around the top of the tree trunk and so the cycle began. For each scar on a FIA's body there was a companion scar on Ababa's but that didn't stop mother from beating daughter father from beating mother. In 1775 Adwar Addu became the first girl of the village to be proposed to by one of the British soldiers. The first time the White man came Edwards mother asks if he has parents to show him around the village. While Adwar prepared herself for him can I come if he acts running after her parents as they walked she heard Babar's know in one ear and Kobe's yes in the other her father's ear one and soon Phil was standing before the first white man she had ever seen. He is happy to meet the translator said as the white man held his hand out with fear. She did not accept it. Instead she hid behind her father's leg and watched him. They stopped first by FIA's own compound. This is where we live. Fear told the white man and he smiled at her dumbly his green eyes hidden in fog. He didn't understand even after his translator spoke to him. He didn't understand. Kobe held a free hand as he and Baba left the White man through the compound.

[00:11:38] Here in this village Kobe said Each wife has their own hut. This is the hut she shares with her children. When it is her husband's night to be with her he goes to her in her hut. The white man's eyes grew clear as the translation was given and suddenly fear realized he was seeing through new eyes the mud of her hut was the straw of the roof he could finally see them. A few weeks later the white man came back to pay respects to outdraws mother and a fear in all the other villagers gathered around to see what he would offer. There was the bride price of 15 pounds. There were goods he'd brought with him from the castle carried on the backs of a shanties Kobe made a stand behind him as they watched the servants come in with fabric millet gold and iron. When they walked back to their compound Colea pulled fire aside letting his wives and other children walk in front of them. Do you understand what just happened. He asked her in the distance. Baba slipped her hand and Saffy fees. His brother had just turned 11 but he could already climb up the trunk of a palm tree using nothing but his bare hands and feet for support.

[00:12:49] The white man came to take Adwar away FIA's said her father nodded. The white men live in the Cape Coast Castle there they trade goods with our people. Like iron in Milot her father put his hand on her shoulder and kissed the top of her forehead. But when he pulled away the look in his eyes was troubled and distant.

[00:13:12] Yes we get iron and milit but we must give them things in return. That man came from Cape Coast to marry at war and there will be more men like him who will come and take our daughters away. But you are my own I have bigger plans for you than to live as a white man's wife. You will marry a man of our village about turned around just and a fish caught her eyes. Bob scowled if you looked at our father to see if he had noticed. But Kobe did not say a word. SE The smell was unbearable. In the corner a woman was crying so hard that it seemed her bones would break from her convulsions. This was what they wanted. The baby had messed itself and for its mother had no milk. She was naked save the small scrap of fabric the traders had given her to wipe her nipples when they leaked but they had miscalculated.

[00:14:10] No food for mother meant no food for baby the baby would cry soon but the sound would be absorbed by the mud was subsumed into the cries of the hundreds of women who surrounded it. As he had been in the women's dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle for two weeks she spent her 15th birthday there on her 14th birthday. She was in the heart of a shanty land in her father's big man's compound. He was the best warrior in the village so everyone had come to pay their respects to the daughter who grew more beautiful with each passing day.

[00:14:44] Wasse Nero brought 60 yams more yams than any other sudah had ever brought before he would have married him in the summer when the sun stretched long and high when the palm trees could be tapped for wine climb by the spry children their arms holding the trunk in a hug as they shimmied to the top to pluck the fruits that waited. Their when she wanted to forget the castle she thought of these things but she did not expect joy. Hell was a place of remembering each beautiful moment passed through the mind's eye until it fell to the ground like a rotten mango perfectly useless uselessly Perfect's a soldier came into the dungeon and began to speak. He had to hold his nose to keep from vomiting. The woman did not understand him. His voice didn't seem angry but they had

learned to back away from the sight of that uniform. That skin the color of coconut meat. The soldier repeated himself louder this time as though volume would coax understanding. Irritated he ventured further into the room. He stepped in feces and cursed. He plucked the baby from a forest cradled arms and a four began to cry. He slapped her and she stopped a learned reflex poncey sitting next to se. The two have made the journey to the castle together. Now that they weren't walking constantly or speaking in hushed tones as he had time to get to know her journey friend.

[00:16:13] Where are they taking the baby. He asks. Spit onto the clay floor and swirled the spittle with her finger creating a salve. They will kill it I'm sure. She said the baby was conceived before a fool was marriage ceremony. As punishment. The village chief had sold her to the traders before had Tsotetsi this when she first came into the dungeon when she was still certain that a mistake had been made that her parents would return for her. By morning a fool had died. Her skin was purple and blue and Essy knew that she had held her breath and so Naeemi took her. They would all be punished for this.

[00:16:55] The soldiers came in though he was no longer able to tell what time the mud was of the dungeon made all equal. There was no sunlight. Darkness was day and night and everything in between.

[00:17:08] Sometimes there were so many bodies stacked into the women's dungeon that they all had to lie stomach down so that the women could be stacked on top of them it was one of those days as he was kicked to the ground by one of the soldiers his foot at the base of her neck so that she couldn't turn her head to breathe. Anything but the dust and detritus from the ground. The new women were brought in and some were wailing so hard that the soldiers smacked them unconscious. They were piled on top of the other women their bodies dead weight. When this smacked ones came to there were no more tears as he could feel the woman on top of her. Yerin traveled between both of their legs. As he learned to split her life into before the castle. And now before the castle she was the daughter of big man and his third wife mommy. Now she was dust before the castle. She was the prettiest girl in the village now she was thin air. Everybody all the way up here in the

[00:18:59] I think I see Andy Fife up here at Welkom and welcome Yaddo to Seattle. I know this is your last day here you're on your way out as soon as we're done but welcome. And I also want to say congratulations to Seattle Public Library on 20 years of Seattle reads. And. More importantly the last two years books by African-American female. And

[00:19:31] Every time the crowd seems to grow and grow so I think there is a trend that you might want to move into 30 years on that that's where I am so delighted to get a chance to sit and talk with you.

[00:19:43] And I want to say how much I enjoy your book along with everybody else. I thought it was really interesting. All of the accolades that you received. Roxane Gay said that she couldn't put the book down. Zaini Smith who is an incredible writer just use one word she said spectacular. And then

the San Francisco Chronicle just picked up everybody's word tremendous spectacular essential reading. I want to ask first do you know any of those people.

[00:20:12] I know Zaydi now. She sent me maybe the sweetest email I've ever received about my writing.

[00:20:19] When she finished the book and I made it a point to kind of stock her out and invent and introduce myself. And now we talk to you.

[00:20:29] Does it put a lot of pressure on you as a writer to have such accomplished writers bring their accolade in the way that they have including in Tallahassee.

[00:20:39] Coats Yeah I mean I think you know the bar has been set and it's really it's really such an honor to have so many writers that I deeply admire and recognize something in my work that has made them want to talk about it and present.

[00:20:56] So forever grateful.

[00:21:00] But a lot of pressure. I'm sure a little bit. Yeah. I want to start by getting to know who your jocey is. We we've read the book

[00:21:12] And I want to just say Marcellas those two pieces that Komori read are not the last 80 pages. So you better get on it.

[00:21:22] I just want to know a little bit about who you are where I know you. We know you come from Ghana. But who is your job. In your own words not just what we read about you. So I guess the biographical information I was born in Ghana

[00:21:43] And then left when I was two and my family moved around a lot as a child. When I was a child. So we lived in Ohio Illinois Tennessee and I spent most of my childhood and Alabama and then from there I moved to California for school at Stanford and then Iowa for grad school. And so really kind of a hallmark of my life for many years was this transience. And I think I mentioned earlier today to some people that moving around so much made it very difficult for me to kind of figure out my place in the world. It was an incredibly shy child and still a pretty shy adult. But I'm getting better. And so very early on I realized that books were a great comfort and a way for me to kind of start to understand people and to figure out how to be a better citizen how to be a better a better communicator and a more empathetic person.

[00:22:41] And so I started reading incredibly voraciously at a very young age and pretty quickly for me reading and writing when handed if I could do that thing that I loved so much. So the first story that I ever wrote I wrote when I was 7 years old for the Reading Rainbow young writers and illustrators competition. Obsessed with that show and obsessed with Lavar Burton

[00:23:11] And the story that I wrote it was called just me and my dog. And it was a very thinly veiled plea to my parents to allow me to get

[00:23:21] Which they never did. And I didn't win that competition but I got honorable mention LeVar Burton signed my search back and

[00:23:31] That was really kind of that was the moment that I felt like I had arrived as a writer.

[00:23:36] Yeah. So I think for the rest of my life since then I've just been kind of chasing that feeling of having an apartment and send something to my heart.

[00:23:46] This is something that I know I'm trying to get a hold of.

[00:23:51] And I know that you are a Fante and a Seante jocey is and Seante.

[00:23:57] I loved all the names in the book.

[00:24:01] If people don't know twee names are pretty much after the days of the week. So if you look at all of the names you get a chance to see when people were born. And for me my imagination got a chance to kind of figure out what might have been happening on those days of the week. But but before you started this journey what did you know about being Fontana's Seante besides the fact that that blood ran through your.

[00:24:30] I didn't know a whole lot.

[00:24:32] Admittedly my father's in a Seante and my mother's a Fonzi and I think they both do a really great job of trying to keep the community alive within us. Every place that we moved to they were very quick to start to start community with other West Africans. One of my earliest memories of my father's every time he would move to a new place he would grab the phone book and look up West African sounding last names and then just call them and be like I'm I'm in town. And. That's really how they started to and make friends and build community and so I think it was important to them that we continue to kind of feel this connection to Gauna to our heritage.

[00:25:15] But it's hard to do it's hard to kind of carry on all of your home traditions when you're raising a child and race. And so I think one of the hallmarks of my childhood and probably my brothers would say the same thing is this hunger to know more about what it means to be a part of these two ethnic groups. Seante and Fonzi and in this book very much sprang out of a desire to kind of learn more about us about my people and about where I had come from.

[00:25:48] So you are the impetus for writing the book was really about finding out more about yourself and your family having been to the Cape Coast Castle and experienced those slaveholders. It's interesting this has 203 capacity Rover and it's a huge space which is probably about five times the size of any one of those slaveholders in the Cape Coast Castle. So I want to ask what was your.

Because I know I had a physical and emotional reaction. What was your physical and emotional reaction the first time you visited the Cape Coast Castle. Yeah

[00:26:30] I went for the first time to the castle in 2009 and I was in Ghana to research a book. I didn't really know what I was doing at all. And I was very fortunate to have received a fellowship to travel to Ghana. In order to do research and really kind of serendipitously a friend had come to visit and he asked if I wanted to go see the Cape Coast Castle. It hadn't been on my itinerary at all and no one knew about it. I didn't really know I couldn't. There's no way to know until you're in there.

[00:27:01] And so the tour guide who did a really great job started walking us through the upper levels and there's a church there was a school there were all of these things for the people who were inhabiting this space above.

[00:27:14] And then from there he took us down dungeons and I think you know hands down maybe the most harrowing experience of my life to date with standing in one of those dungeons and I was only in there for five minutes and I was talking to a young woman earlier who talked about how the women's dungeons still.

[00:27:33] So it's just it's hard to it's hard to fathom right. It's just completely hard to fathom. And I was filled with so much rage first and also grief and then just thinking about the fact that there were these three people walking about Free Gold Coast people and in some cases walking above a new kind of immediately that I wanted to juxtapose those two experiences that. Of a Gold Coast one free and living as the wife of a soldier and not somebody captain the dungeon.

[00:28:06] I think when I started reading and I got to about page 18 and I want it to stop because I was like oh God I know where this is going. And I didn't want to have that experience at that LoL read. However by continuing to read I found that there was a level of humanity that you incorporated into jails Collins existence as a slaver and his relationship with his wife S.A and I had never seen or heard or read anything that allowed me to have a level of compassion for slavers.

[00:28:46] Why was that important to incorporate.

[00:28:49] Yeah well I think one of the most notable things that the tour guide said when we were walking through was that he mentioned really kind of in passing the fact that the soldiers would sometimes marry the local women and they kept hanging on to that fact. What what does what does it mean to be able to do the work that these soldiers were doing. That work of slave slaveholding. And then go home or go to go to your room and your Fante wife your wife. In that same room. How do you kind of separate your your mind in that way. I read a really incredible and very helpful book called the Door of No Return by William St. Clair. Who is. I don't I don't know if he's still a Cambridge professor but he's all this archival research about the Gold Coast the Cape Coast Castle to create a book that talked about the castle during the time periods that I was interested in and that book had a lot more mention of these relationships how the soldiers were often married. Back home in the UK with full family lives and this this thing and the Gold Coast with their little secrets.

[00:30:01] So they would have these entire families that they'd never acknowledged outside of their life in the castle and so part of my part of my work I felt and trying to figure out who James Collins was as a person was trying to first feel some empathy for him to think about what it means to kind of to not to kind of but to love somebody who was black and then go down into the dungeon and degrade blackness. And I don't know if I know. I don't know if I completely understand that but that was kind of that was my starting point for thinking about him as a character.

[00:30:41] So interesting had to explore the relationship of Fante or Seante Africans in general and their role in the transatlantic slave trade. I think we have this romantic view I know you know I did until I actually learned about it that this was that Africans were not complicit at all but there is a reason for that.

[00:31:11] And what did you how did you come about your learning around their involvement in the slave trade.

[00:31:20] I mean I knew about it but I think it's the kind of thing but we prefer to speak about and whispers Zino and so it wasn't something that a it wasn't a history that I knew very intimately at all. But when I went to the castle I felt like the guide was very free with all of this information and that. That struck me and that I felt strongly that you shouldn't have to travel to Ghana and tour a castle in order to be able to get this history it should be something that we that we make about write about.

[00:31:51] Talk about a little more openly and I was interested in in I guess what I would think of as the layers of exploitation that were occurring at that time and the way that colonialism created these very very divisive situations among the different ethnic groups and pitted people against each other as a way of gaining gaining further control. And so you know all of these conflicts that already existed among the DeFrantz ethnic groups were exacerbated and made worse and slavery was a part of that absolutely.

[00:32:29] You think that and I still struggle with this question constantly. Slavery existed in Africa but I'm I'm

[00:32:41] I'm holding on to the fact that I don't believe that there's anything that compared to chattel slavery and I don't believe that Africans have that concept that that was what was happening.

[00:32:55] Yeah that's exactly right. I think slavery existed and in Ghana and the Gold Coast at the time but it was

[00:33:03] Nothing nothing like the slavery that we had here. And there were far more pathways to freedom than there were then there were in the US where they were almost almost no Pathways to Freedom.

[00:33:17] One of the concepts that I see kind of flows through the book is colorism and the mixing of obrony blood so to speak. It is it is something that exists in America has existed among black people for a very long time.

[00:33:37] But I was struck on my visit to Guyana that there was a lot of interest in skin bleach and light skin will light mean.

[00:33:47] How does that kind of conflict play out on the continent in your experience. Yeah I guess I don't know too much about what that looks like today but I will say I think that it's a reflection of the fact that

[00:34:06] Western Western beauty standards and beauty ideals ideals have become so pervasive that not just in Africa but throughout the world. People are kind of attempting to adhere to these very stringent rules about what it means to be beautiful what it means to be a person of value. And oftentimes we associate that with lighter skin. So I think it is a pervasive issue that it plays out tragic way in the book. I think in Harlem with the Willie and Robert and how Robert is able to get him the and he shuns his wife and then essentially takes on a white white well not essentially he actually Snakes on a white white

[00:34:59] Is that in any way treat it as a path to more freedom or a metaphor in some ways in the book for actually attaining some level of freedom.

[00:35:14] Well yes I mean I think for Robert it was a way of obtaining more freedom.

[00:35:20] You know Willy had all of these aspirations he wanted to be a singer but at the time there was something called the paper bag test where he would go in for a job and they would hold a paper bag up next to your skin and if you were darker than the paper bag then you wouldn't get that job you were lighter than you could.

[00:35:39] And so this kind of limited Willey's prospects greatly whereas Robert had the freedom to move around the world in a way that really wanted to move around the world but couldn't.

[00:35:51] And so I think that that moment where they're staring across the street at each other and Willy is kind of ready to I guess to let go. That was a really kind of poignant moment for me to think through. And I also I always have this thought experiment about Robert's descendants and the fact that they are probably walking around somewhere believing that they're completely wives and not recognizing this particular piece of their history and how they are implicated in everything that affects black people.

[00:36:26] I think that only came to the fore in the US around Sally Hemings and Jefferson and the fact that there was a family of it's black and there is a fair way that white and are all intertwined in some way a little bit more along the topic of freedom.

[00:36:45] There seems to be as well a quest a fire in every character in their search for freedom freedom from something freedom to to call their own shots freedom to be who they were.

[00:37:03] It's that feeling that you picked up from exploring stories. Or is that one of your conclusion. Yeah the fire

[00:37:16] And water as well were two elements that were really important to me in the writing of this book.

[00:37:22] One of the challenges of covering so much time roughly 250 years was that I knew that I was going to constantly be moving forward. I was never returning to a character and never going back in time. And so I had to think of ways to allow the lineage to cohere and allow the narratives to cohere. And so because. This book really opened for me with this idea of a woman setting a massive fire and then escaping into it and then everyone starts to refer to Afia as a child of that fire. Her descendants are implicated in that relationship. And so you see characters like Yao who is scarred by fire characters like a queen. Who. Creates this massive fire of characters like Marjorie who are afraid of fire. And that was a way for me in a craft sense to be able to bring Afia through the lineage without having to make her into a ghost and do something like that. So she doesn't have to be physically present she can be metaphysically present. And then similarly for the side of the family there's this relationship to water since SE is sent through the middle passage.

[00:38:37] And so that allows the two sides to be in conversation with each other but also allowed the linear inches to cope here and there is that sense of attaining some level of being free trade fire and or water or rain. I think it's really interesting too that Ghana was the first African nation to gain its own independence and so you've got this contradiction so to speak of it being one of the largest areas where slaves were shipped out of.

[00:39:08] I mean you've got this independence is this quest for independence and freedom all at the same time. How do the characters deal with oppression oppression that comes through their lineage oppression that they deal with one another and the oppression that's all around them in some ways.

[00:39:33] Yeah I think that the characters deal in very different ways depending on which character. And for me one of one of the things I hoped to do with this book was to talk about the ways we survive the way that we stay healthy even in the face of great trauma and great adversity. And so whatever way I could find to bring in these pockets of comfort and joy for the characters to bring in is the kind of the beauty of struggle. I wanted to do that. And so whether it's a character like Willie who finds great solace in the church and becomes a very active member of the church or a character like Sonny who becomes very active in activism whatever it was that allowed these characters to find a way to to seek out control and seek out comfort.

[00:40:29] I wanted to make sure that that was present.

[00:40:32] One of my favorite characters is Uncle H. I actually have an uncle that I call age.

[00:40:39] So I connected with him two shovels as well as was called and I think that his character is so much African in an American setting of oppression and the research that you did around conscription is fascinating to me. Can you talk a little bit about the prison leasing system and how you came up on this new found if you will oppression in a working environment that the immigrants share.

[00:41:20] So when I when I started working on the book and when I kind of figured out what I really wanted to do I made a family tree that looks a lot like the one that's at the front of the book now except mine also had the names and the dates and the significant historical points that were happening during each time period for aitches chapter.

[00:41:40] All I had written was h 1860 something reconstructions slash Jim Crow.

[00:41:48] So it was it was pretty vague and I didn't really know what the story itself was going to be. It was kind of Treynor research into that time period and figure it out as I went.

[00:41:59] And so I started by looking at jobs that newly emancipated slaves would have had an obviously sharecropping came up over and over and over and then I found a really great article by Douglas Blackman in the Wall Street Journal titled from Alabama's past capitalism teamed with racism to create a cruel partnership. It's a very long title for a great article about a man named green cotton Ham who was arrested for vagrancy and. Forced to work in these coal mines in Alabama. Sold by the state of Alabama to these private corporations and I became so fascinated by that history. Black men also has a

[00:42:43] Book called Slavery by Another Name that won the Pulitzer several years ago. It's a great book. And so just the fact of Condit leasing and the way that it kind of shaped the way we the way we criminalize black men today even i just became kind of consumed with this history and fell down a rabbit hole and H's chapter is what emerged from the

[00:43:07] Ooze. I will read that chapter over and over again. I think you might have read that already. Body language is a really important element in this story because a number of characters are told to speak today and when they are speaking English or vice versa and language or the suppression of language seems to be one of the most important tools of oppression.

[00:43:32] Was that intended. Was that your intention to really bring up that element of oppression by incorporating those conflicts.

[00:43:44] Absolutely. I mean I think that was one of the first steps to breaking a person once they got. Onto U.S. soil was to kind of take their language away take their ability to communicate with their fellow

[00:43:58] Their fellow slaves away and so Nessus chapter I think is the chapter that I explored that with most thoroughly so you have Nast's describing her relationship with SC as see who was forced

to speak English whenever she spoke tweets and as she was punished for it. And NASA in fact gets her name. Because of this punishment and so very soon as she learns to be a silent woman and that's kind of inherits that silence. And then Pinky the child that. That nece. Cares for is using language as a way to kind of control her circumstance he chooses not to speak anymore. And it's for her I think an act of rebellion and a way to express this great grief that she has. And then NASA marries. Sam. This fellow slave and we find that Sam was punished every time he didn't speak English. Wow. And so this relationship to language and the way that I'm taking a person's language away is kind of the first step in taking their community away taking their ability to create community and keep up community away. I was really interested in that particularly in that chapter.

[00:45:16] So what what you what are the challenges of carrying on the grill stories and keeping our stories alive when language is taken away or not allowed to be used in a traditional way.

[00:45:32] Well I think this is one of the ways that black people are incredibly resilient because you create language you create a new language you know so whether it's the music of oppression the music of struggle or the big gatherings whether it's using kind of church Tax a way to kind of reclaim your own space in a place that has taken this space away from you. And so you think it's it's created it's created something new creating something new out of. Out of

[00:46:06] Out of an oppressive circumstance.

[00:46:09] I think the other thing I love about the book is and I won't call them proverbs because I'm not really sure that there are African proverbs but there are so many sales in the book that strike you and you just kind of have to highlight them and put the book down or at least I did one of my favorites is the essay and she says weakness is treating someone as tough as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves. At one point when your finally visits his mother and Christianity comes up he says if you point the people's eye to the future they might see what is being done to hurt them in the present.

[00:46:53] And then when you speaking to his class his history class part of the quote is we believe in when and when talking about whose story do you believe. He says We believe the one who has the power he is the one who gets to write the story. Are these proverbs or again are these your own conclusion.

[00:47:16] I mean I made them. OK. There

[00:47:21] Not proverbs but I suppose they have a proverbial sense to them very much interested in a con proverbs and there are many actual con proverbs sprinkled throughout the book beginning with that epigraph. The family is like the forests. And so I think I wanted to have this sense of being in conversation with the proverbs that already existed by creating these very wise characters who had opportunities to make up their own beautiful saying yes I was looking for Sankofa and it didn't come up and go back and get it a go and get it.

[00:47:59] So there is the last database is a key part that these two stories Marjorie and Marcus and my belief is that Marjorie and Marcus are both you and I'll tell you why.

[00:48:21] Some of the issues that Marjorie deals with in school with being Verd not fitting in. Her relationship with Graham who is someone who is of German descent who just acts like he belongs wherever he is. And then Marquez who goes into this long dialogue about his research and if he does this then he has to do that. And I'm thinking that those both both of those characters are you. Last night I heard you say that you had to really kind of be focused and very very disciplined about how you wrote the book because you could go down huge rabbit holes about that.

[00:49:05] So those two characters wrapped the book. When did they come to tell the final stories as you were writing this book.

[00:49:15] Yeah I think a home going is the only thing I've ever written where I kind of knew the ending from the beginning I knew really early on that I wanted these two sides of the family to come together in some way.

[00:49:29] I didn't know specifically how that would happen but it was important to me to have this kind of moment of of restoration of I guess reconciliation but not quite that just this moment of recognition between these two sides of the family and I think you know of all of the characters in the book I think Marcus and Marjorie do most closely resemble me.

[00:49:54] I think in part because they're the closest to us in time and so they are kind of the easiest ones for me to wrap my head around my head around in terms of what they what they might have been thinking the things they might have been going through that section that you talked about where Marcus is talking about his research and if this then that if Bebek then that is absolutely how I felt right just in terms of the overwhelming nature of trying to capture everything that I wanted to capture.

[00:50:21] And the weight of that. And so I think these two characters allowed me to think about. Again yeah. Think about what it what it means to come together for a family and this is ultimately about a family that has been so completely fractured that they can no longer recognize themselves as family well.

[00:50:42] Just one final note before we go to Q and A in your acknowledgments you thank your parents and you say like so many immigrants bear the very definition of hard work and sacrifice. I want to know what do you think about immigrants today and the plight of being Verd and particularly in light of recent comments made by a member of the administration around

[00:51:22] Around the inability for immigrants to assimilate into American culture. Oh man

[00:51:33] Yeah. It's just I have so much as so many of us do. You know I'm really struggling through these through these constant assaults on people's characters and their humanity. You know I think

[00:51:53] And I I just I think about my parents and everything that they have done to allow me to be able to sit in a room like this in front of all of you people this is kind of something beyond my own wildest dreams. But surely beyond there's you know and the fact that they have contributed so much and I have contributed so much to American society American culture and to have that constantly negated and constantly taken for granted is as enraging frankly.

[00:52:27] And so we hope that's you know I hope that we that we recognize that American xenophobia is has a long history as well.

[00:52:39] And it's something that we have to we have to kind of guard against. I also want to recommend that the list of references research books that are in the back of home going should be on all of your reading list because I think it would give you

[00:53:10] Another perspective about where we are in America today and how it relates to our history questions right.

[00:53:19] All right.

[00:53:22] So we have folks with Mike so they will just raise your hand and leave them raised and Linda or Michelle will come and find you. I think we have a question down here in the front. Linda on the front row on the your left my right my left everybody's left thank you.

[00:53:41] I think that goes first. Thank you so much for this book. You gave it almost a direct quote. My book club read it this month and I spent a whole day going down the rabbit hole over the coal miner and H went down a lot of rabbit holes and I want to thank you for that. But one of the things that really struck me about the book and we talked about it was that the were the men the men in the book and their relation to family. And when it broke down it seemed all through the book in Africa. There was such a strong relationship between the men and their daughters and their families and the fight to keep it together. And the breakdown happened after H. Held onto the Africa as you were talking about and then he was broken broken and broken broken by the hole that broke down after that. Can you speak a little bit about that was that a conscious I mean I think. In America the are on the American side of the novel there was this particular struggle of men but also the women who wanted to be a part of their families lives but could not because of the way that they that they were ripped apart starting with Sam. Ness's NASA's father or iness. Husband and then continuing to Cojo who who was a part of. The mass

[00:55:15] Fleeing and then was kind of wrapped back up in the Fugitive Slave Act. H is the first character on that side.

[00:55:23] He kind of he kind of begins a new lineage in a way.

[00:55:26] You know he's the first character on that side who was able to stay in so if Marcus were doing his genealogy today he would only ever be able to trace his family back to H because H cannot

ever know who his parents were. And so it was important to me to have a character particularly a male character be that kind of strong hold for a family because they think oftentimes African-American men are maligned for not being able to be there for their families or what have you.

[00:55:59] And so I liked the idea of each being the first person who gets to stay was it hard to get published.

[00:56:09] Was it hard to get published. Yes. It's always hard to get. Yeah I started writing this book

[00:56:19] In 2009. And so it took me about seven years to read the whole process to come together. And I wrote much of it when I was in graduate school at the Iowa Writers Workshop and one of the cool things about the workshop is that they would bring agents in to come talk to us. And I mean I was completely clueless.

[00:56:41] I had no idea how a book left your computer and became something that people could pick up. And so these meetings were really interesting to me. But every agent I met with in Iowa said no. And finally I just stopped going to those meetings and stopped talking to people until I finished the book. And then from there I did. I did things to kind of the old fashioned way which was to look at the acknowledgment page of books that I really liked and find out who they were thinking as their agent.

[00:57:14] I just sent cold queries to those agents asking if they would just read my book. And I was very fortunate that my agent decided to do that.

[00:57:25] And that's how I kind of started on the path of publication. But as any writer will tell you you hear so many no's before you hear a single yes that it's really easy to get discouraged. And if I had believed all of those agents in the meetings who did not think that this was a worthwhile project I wouldn't be here today. So you do have to kind of hold onto whatever it is in yourself

[00:57:50] That believes that what you're writing is important and it's worth it.

[00:57:56] And happy to be on the other side of that process.

[00:58:00] It probably sounds horrible but I was so glad to know that it took you seven years to write the book. I was like there's hope. I

[00:58:10] Don't know how I eyesight by the time I spent day I love that you stay with it.

[00:58:19] Yes.

[00:58:20] Vivian you touched on the color issue earlier and I just wanted to I've traveled to southern Africa and several countries and I noticed self-esteem that there's a gap between African-Americans and the Africans that I met on the continent they had strong self-esteem. If the standards were paraded into their psyche and they had a positive image of themselves and you have this both

cultures. What's your take on that. Did you struggle with that coming year and seeing the negative lips eyes nose to hair skin tone and all that stuff that is under attack constantly by culture culture wars.

[00:59:20] What's your take on. That's a great question.

[00:59:23] I think one of the things that happens. I guess speaking for immigrants when black immigrants one of the things that happens when you come to America is suddenly you're in a country where not everybody looks like you anymore you know.

[00:59:37] So when you're living in Ghana for example among a group of people who are also black it's easy to celebrate yourself. You know it's easy to celebrate blackness because blackness is prevalent blackness is everywhere. And you understand it's beauty in that context. And I think you know here you have to kind of you have to fight a lot more to going back to the question about beauty standards and that whole thing Western ideals. And you know you have to kind of carve out your space in a way that you don't have to watch

[01:00:10] Back on the.

[01:00:11] And so I think that that might have something to you think it also has anything to do with the fact that Africans know where they're from. Sure. And the other is just to expand on that a little bit what are the things that struck me about the Cape Coast Castle is that there is a school there and there I think it was a Saturday school when I was there and the kids who were like four to maybe 14 knew more about me as an African-American than I could ever think about knowing about them.

[01:00:43] To feel like there is this intention around learning more about what we are called the stolen one.

[01:00:58] Where did you get the idea for the book cover.

[01:01:03] Well a little industry secrets. Most authors are not really in on their book covers that all

[01:01:10] The hardcover both of the covers actually well the hardcover is the first was the first cover that I saw and this is water and fire water and fire.

[01:01:19] And I think by the time the designer His name is Peter Mendelson had come up with that he'd done you know tons of others that had gone through everybody at Knopf and so this was the first. This was the first cover I saw the paperback cover. I saw one that I didn't like. And so I said no to that. And then this is the second one that they came up with.

[01:01:41] Maybe so I think maybe maybe sometimes you can kind of you know give a little bit more direction. I don't know very much about visual art. Or making covers at all so I didn't really offer any notes I just I just knew when I didn't like something and that's kind of how I approached that process.

[01:02:03] I have a question about AIDS.

[01:02:07] I guess I was a little disappointed that the opportunity for him to find out the connection with that old man I guess and his family that he did not take advantage of it's old news in about a month or so. I read the book.

[01:02:34] Me too. He's done it

[01:02:36] Might have happened but maybe it wasn't age but the character that he he ended up with the book ended up going to Africa with Michael markets.

[01:02:56] Ok.

[01:02:56] I'm sorry but like Markham's he had the opportunity it wouldn't take the opportunity to see the connection between him that oh man could have told him about his family. You're right. I know what you're talking about

[01:03:14] With that Marcus. Marcus. Yeah

[01:03:18] Yeah. I'm not sure why he didn't take the opportunity. I think at that point he was incredibly frustrated with his work. You know right after that scene is the moment where he kind of starts to talk about his struggles with his research and kind of not being able to capture everything in the way that he wants to. And so I understand the impulse to be like well then go talk to this person. But I think part of it is that he knows that he's never going to get the complete story and that's what he truly wants. And so everything feels like everything feels like an approximation to him. And so for Marcus I think what we see throughout his chapter is somebody who is deeply curious and deeply frustrated and has his curiosity we've got time for two more questions.

[01:04:05] I I really love your book. I'm from Ghana too. I came here when I was a little bit older than you. So my question is basically in the book you talk a lot about the two family lines and how they kind of split. And I think right now in American culture there's a lot of things happening where people are trying to kind of reconnect. And there's definitely a rift between African-Americans or black Americans and Africans like immigrants like us who came here. And so I'm trying to I want to ask like what do you think is a good way to kind of progress the dialogue between continental Africans and black Americans because time has put us apart so much that it's hard to find like a similar starting place to kind of heal the wounds we've had. Because like you said Ghanians did sell black people but we didn't know we were selling you to this. So and they also like in Ghana. We also were colonized and I think Americans and black Americans forget that we had colonialism in Ghana until 1957 when the colonial powers did leave and even then they didn't leave. And they had warped our minds about what slavery was like.

[01:05:21] So we kind of reconcile.

[01:05:25] I mean I think about this a lot. And I think part of it is the fact that. You know in in Ghana we think a lot more in terms of ethnicity event and race. Going back to that statement about how if you're in a country where everybody looks like you of course race is not the first thing that comes to mind but ethnicity can be. And so even within my own family as I said my father's and Ashanti and my mother's a Fante and there are there are rifts within those two those two groups. And I don't think I think from my father you know if you asked him to describe himself he would probably first say he was in a shanty then he would say he was an icon and then he would say he was a Gandhian and then he would say he was a West African. Like it would take a very long time for him to say black. And so I think part of part of the task when we do move to America is to start to understand and learn more about American history in terms of race because I think until you have that kind of foundation that groundwork for understanding what is going on here you're going to be approaching it with a very different framework. And I think that that task of trying to understand. Can be difficult when you're already navigating all of the other stuff that comes along with being an immigrant in this. But it is a specific task a task that is particular to black immigrants and one that I think is really important for us to start start doing a better job of.

[01:06:59] There are also traditions I think that we share that we don't know that we share. Yeah and one of the traditions that comes up in the book is The wailing that takes place seven days in advance of a funeral. And what we do in America it comes from the South as a wake you know so there are these connections I think we just we just don't recognize one last question.

[01:07:22] Yeah over here. So hi thank you for writing your book. My name is Mandy and I wanted to just get more insight into the use of sex in your book. I know in the beginning and I think it also kind of travels throughout the generations just this idea of using sex as a way of kind of like conquering or showing ownership or power. But then I also saw even in the earlier generations sex was also use us a way to I guess like show love. And there are also some chapters and some scenes where it's was like as a little kid like some of the characters when they were younger they would be like oh yeah I would like to see them having sex. And it looked like there was love at the same time it looked like it was.

[01:08:11] So I wanted to just get more insight into what you were thinking when you kind of use sex as a way to show these two different ways of surviving and just why you decided to kind of keep that as a constant Yeah I don't know if I was thinking about sex specifically but I was certainly thinking about love like I was thinking about all of these stories as as DeFrantz different love stories essentially and love as kind of a way to to survive. Sometimes it's a source of conflict and a danger for some of these characters. But then in other and other chapters it's a source of comfort. But I think you know I was I was trying to imagine what it is that that allows people to again persist to continue. And I think you know when you are writing a genealogical book people have to make babies. And. So. That. Comes. In the ways in which people use sex I think was really important but I don't know if I have a better answer to that question.

[01:09:25] I don't know if I was thinking about it specifically in those well we want to say thank you so very much.

[01:09:51] Thank you so much. Thank you. Vivian thank you.

[01:09:56] Yah thank you Kemarre thank all of you for being here tonight.

[01:10:03] 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.