



Library podcast

Karen Russell Discusses "Orange World and Other Stories"

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[00:00:37] Hi everyone my name's Linda Johns, she/her. I am a librarian here at the Central Library along with my colleague Misha Stone over here. We work in Reader Services where it's our job to match read help readers find their next great book. And we're delighted because our author tonight Karen Russell is someone we'd like to recommend often and as a matter of fact if you're playing along with book bingo she fits in many squares. Her four books fit in four different squares here. If you need a bingo card they're over here. Before we begin this event I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. So together let us also honor their elders past and present.

[00:01:24] We thank them for their stewardship of this land.

[00:01:28] We also liked it that we'd like to thank the Seattle Public Library Foundation and a grant from Gary Kunis that makes our author series possible. Another thing that makes our series of authors or literary events possible is our partnership with independent bookstores like Elliott Bay and now I'd like to introduce Rick from Elliott Bay. Thank you.

[00:01:51] Thank you Linda. Thank you very much for being here. About twelve thirteen years ago is 2006 that for the first time a debut right then debut writer by the name of Karen Russell came to for us to Elliott Bay. But but out in the larger world with the first book of stories a book with the rather auspicious title St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves. That book of singular and and and. Vivid stories has been followed in ensuing years by a novel Swamplandia! which I think was about 2010 and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. The notorious year they did not give a Pulitzer and most people felt this should have been that should have

been the book. And then in 2013 another book of stories of Vampires in the Lemon Grove again great energy and and ferocity in these stories and just just life force that's that's there. And I because I was in a place. No I know that book got quite far along in the whole deliberations for National Book Award for fiction that year didn't get into the final group but it was very much in the in the talking. She's here tonight for a new remarkable new book of stories book entitled Orange World and Other Stories eight stories that reaffirm and show even more how vital her voice is in giving a sense of almost super life.

[00:03:28] I mean life that's just so intensely evoked and just is put there right in front of your eyes in ways that is hard to believe. One of the things about tonight too is in the past visits Karen's come here from her home state of Florida which is the other corner of things at least once I believe from Berlin. And but now she's come here from her new relatively new home of Portland. So she's she's in this time zone and and just down down the ways so the travels aren't so far and we hope it means she gets here more often. This book tonight admitted a few a couple of stories are set here one in Portland and another this wild story. At the beginning of two women who take a chairlift thinking they're going to a new resort and they end up at another resort and other things happen. This book takes us from our present day but also into some other futures and the story of the one story that's clearly set in our old home state of Florida of that that a state has become new Florida and a group of sisters who ferry people around and pulled boat pulled boats are the center that story and haunting and eerie things happen but they're again part of what she brings to the page. So she'll read from this book and and take questions and she'll be over here at the table to sign copies when when that concludes Karen comes here as someone who's she has received numerous honors awards foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation and the Guggenheim Foundation.

[00:05:15] She was cited by the National Book Foundation when she was under 35 as one of five writers under 35 which is a significant honor and many others the Berlin prize and many other awards. And in closing I assume I usually don't read but from my. Talking about her work John Freeman who has been here before and puts together great anthologies and is a great reader and a wonderful poet of his own right. If you don't have this book yet it's on the back of it. But since most of you this book just came out I don't think too many of you could have this yet. So this is what John Freeman in saying of this work and really what Karen's work is doing has says, "Leading pack of talents. Karen Russell writes the most like she's on fire as in this close to revelation Orange World is her best collection yet her imaginations language syntax has been playing down to the absolute essentials allowing the power of her vision to speak for itself. This is prophetic work written with clarifying fury." Indeed. Thank you for being here tonight. Please join in welcoming Karen Russell.

[00:06:29] Guys thank you so much for being here speaking of orange gold. I notice that the sun is still up somehow and it's beautiful. So I feel even more complimented and so grateful to Rick and Elliott Bay and the Seattle Library for having me here.

[00:06:46] I've really been looking for. It's true that now I live in Portland so I mean it's we're just we're neighbors practically. You know I can get up and back here in a couple hours some of my my family is here tonight so it's very great. And I. This is sort of the second to last stop on my very very short book tour. The publisher moved up the date of this book and I did it kind of a very truncated book tour this time because I'm in the third trimester. Nobody wants to sit on a middle seat in the third trimester. So this is it's a funny thing this book sort of just came out last week and it's been a little a little bit of a whirlwind and coming back to this coast and doing Seattle Portland last felt really really nice. So I'm happy. I'm happy to see you all.

[00:07:39] And I thought I would just read a little bit from the title story.

[00:07:45] There's something it feels like perverse incorrect to me to be reading from this story. Also in the third trimester that's about.

[00:07:55] I uh. I chose this story as the title we had a lot of back and forth. I'm not. I find that kind of harrowing and exciting to kind of try to find the right title for a story collection with my first collection. I had like 20 rejected titles one of which was the very pretentious swimming beyond extinction. My editor was like gerund and you know fair enough. But with Orange World I went to one of these like new anxious new parent classes and it was like a safety course where it really felt like scripted by Stephen King or something we watch these movies where it just came to feel like it seemed like the object of the course was that you would leave feeling resigned to your child's gruesome death.

[00:08:43] You know in a household accident of some kind like it just seemed all but inevitable that this would be your fate.

[00:08:50] And this very like very cheerful very pleasant educator. That you know there's Greenwald and this is this ideal realm. No one's ever really lived in it but we can all imagine it. And it's the place that children deserve and will never get in this life. You know of infinite attention perfectly loving capable parents. And then there's you know red world which is like abuse and neglect and you know every kind of horror. And then there's orange world and that's where most of us live. And then I think that the picture for that orange world was just like you know a groggy man like holding boiling water or something you know. But what I what I liked

about that is sort of an awning to gather these stories under was just this idea that everybody sort of knows that purgatory is space that really is just basically everyday you know where you're like a phone call or an accident away from getting knocked into you know a true house gate maybe or you know if you're if you're an addict you're you know you're like you know one drink away from slipping back into a true red world. I mean I just kept thinking about all the the precariat. And what makes this place so precious to right and then sort of the place that everyone's angling for right like the dreams that people have in common is being this kind of green world. And I think in a lot of these stories as different as they are that felt like that those two polarities I could feel in every story kind of pulling at these characters. So all right that's it's a long wind up to this pitch I'm going to read just for about 20 minutes I write I don't know what's happening to me all these stories are like super sized.

[00:10:30] They just keep getting longer. So I can never finish finish one but my dad was like That's good it's like that show Reading Rainbow then they got to buy the book. So.

[00:10:44] He also instructed me to stop asking people's questions that gave away the ending. I'm going to say I don't know that they're necessarily the point of some of these stories and that in exactly that kind of a way but. But if it works that way and it feels you feel unsatisfied as I did when I watched Reading Rainbow and wanted to like hitch a ride to the library to find out what happened to you know J.B. rabbit or whatever he was reading that I'm happy for that.

[00:11:14] I also received the good advice to stop doing accents when I read this story. So here. You're all welcome.

[00:11:25] Orange World.

[00:11:27] Abnormal result high risk. Clinical outcome. Unknown.

[00:11:34] At night Ray pulls a pillow between her legs and lets the pain scissor at her. She feels like a gut shot animal lying in the road. Ray was not raised with religion so when she sees the blood in the toilet she invents her own prayers. After the results from the third set of tests come back she starts begging anything that might be listening to save her baby.

[00:11:59] And then lo something does answer. I can help you. It spoke without speaking glowing low on the horizon. She had made it over the ledge of 4 a.m. to 5 am what she'd once believed to be a safe HOUR THAT OUT OF THE WOODS Our no longer.

[00:12:20] What are you. A voice tipped out of the red light. That's the wrong question. What would you like me to do.

[00:12:32] Orange world the new parents educators says is where most of us live. She shows a slide a smiling baby with a magenta birthmark whooping one eye. Oh no. A burn mark. The slides jump back in time to the irreversible error. Here is the sleepy father holding a teapot. Orange world is a nest of tangled electrical cords and open drawers filled with steak knives. It is a baby's fat hand hovering over the blushing coils of a toaster oven. It's a crib purchased used. We all make certain compromises of course. We do things we know to be unsafe. You take a shower with your baby and suddenly. The educator knocks her fist on the table to mimic the gavel rap of an infant's skull on marble. This part of the story is autobiographical. Her voice lowers through a whisper to relate the final crime. You fall asleep together on the sofa. Only one of you wakes up. Don't fall asleep. Ray Ray dutifully takes down orange world.

[00:13:43] They have already covered Greenwald a fantasy realm of soft corners and infinite attention. Orange world it seems is this world view it through a spyglass of fire. Welcome home baby says a banner hanging in the classrooms darkest corner. I want to acknowledge that Greenwald is the ideal but orange world is where most of us live. The educator repeats. Then she shows them a parental horror movie and photo stills titled Red world. The educator in her bright Australian accent that I encourage you to imagine. encourages them to imagine babies falling down stairwells and elevator shoots speared by metal and flung from passenger seats drowning in toilet bowls and choking on grapes. Ray has never made it this far into a pregnancy before hers is a geriatric pregnancy. Her husband finds this language hilarious. You're like Sarah in that Bible. Everybody gets a swaddle and a baby doll. The head comes off of rays while she is jamming this head back on the swaddle floats to the ground picking the swaddle up. She steps on it. Sneaker bacteria. Orange world decapitation. Read World. Your head is on backward love. The educator watches as Ray wrenches at around. You should go to the new moms group. The educator suggests it is a great resource for first time mothers. Veteran moms show you the ropes. Ray smiles and thanks her.

[00:15:24] In this crowded room of cheerful expectant people there is no room to say I don't know if there will be a baby. On the first night that the devil appeared to her her husband was on a trip to New York to woo new clients.

[00:15:39] Woo. What a dumb verb. Woo.

[00:15:43] She screamed dropping to all fours on the stairs. The pain expanded to fill the empty house. When the pain threatened to take off the roof she pulled on a wool shirt and stumbled into the moonlit street. A hand spread against her belly. Help me Ray bagged the neighboring houses stared down at her like blank faced jurors. She limped across the road strange light brimmed in the gutter that ran along the sidewalk.

[00:16:11] Its source was unclear. As she advanced the light changed color developing a reddish tent. It was a very short step through this mist into the gutter wading through ankle deep water. RAY cried out pain folded her knees below her a taut and fiery string ran from her pelvis to her throat. And it felt as though some secret hand kept plucking at a. This is how the devil woos you. Before you know it is the devil. A bottomless luminous voice rose out of the drain. Oh yes. She heard herself promise anything.

[00:16:55] Three months later Ray pauses in the bedroom doorway to watch her newborn son breathing.

[00:17:01] He has got a very mature snore. This baby. His father is also sighing logs. She could listen to their duet all night green world. That is the first night that I have not pronounced that word do this is a small trophy to my thumb. The baby was born on the winter solstice emerging into a world of lengthening light. He was born healthy just as the voice in the gutter had promised. Already raised brain and rewired itself to wake her at four thirty five a.m. outside. Snow pours through the neighbors leaflets birches the flakes feel wonderful on her upturned face. Her fever freckled chest. Why did she thought to appeal to heaven. Rae wonders now. She took the first deal offered. She'd done a better job negotiating for the Subaru. Ray kneels in the gutter on a thick paste of dead leaves. She and buttons her shirt to the navel. Snow wakes groggily into water a trickling stream that carries beer tabs and flashing ice into the storm drain. She fishes for the clasp of her bra. Her breasts are straining against the thin lace.

[00:18:20] I think writers compulsively revise sometimes as they read their published work and every time I read that I'm like lazy. That's a lie. All the ladies. No that's not what this woman is we're hearing it like four thirty five a.m. in a gutter. It's just her like soiled weird clearance Haynes thing. So forgive me for that. That's a big lie. On the opposite side of the street her own home gazes back at her.

[00:18:46] The windows look like holes that any monster could reach through the walls seem blue impregnable. Like clockwork at 44 the devil appears making itself out of fog and solidifying its tone has changed completely since the baby's birth.

[00:19:04] No longer does it offer any green guarantees promising safety to her child her friends her family. These nights it's all red threat. Feed me or else. So she does. The gutter is a cold canoe. Ray lowers onto an elbow stretching flat asphalt pushes at her shoulders her tailbone. It seems impossible that she hasn't gotten sick yet in all these weeks of appointments. Perhaps the devil is keeping her well. She tries not to look at it when she looks at it her milk dries up.

[00:19:36] It lays its triangular head on her collarbone using its thin fingered paws to squeeze milk from her left breast into its hairy snout its tail curls around her waist. Unlike her son the devil has dozens of irregular teeth fanged and broken in three rows. Some lie flat against the gums like bright arrowheads and green mud its lips make a cold collar around her nipple. She feels the tugging deep in her groin a menstrual aching milk gushes out of her more milk than it seems any single body could possibly produce more milk.

[00:20:11] She's shorter than her baby ever gets. Below her this devil makes a queer gurgling sound.

[00:20:18] Tonight it has a long paddle like tail a radically needled like a balding cactus which lashes at her side. She feels blood racing away from a fresh cut it drinks it drinks more milk floods around its lips turning its first shiny and wet. She hears the devil swallows slowing its thorny lashes fluttering against her skin its head laws onto her chest breath whistling through its teeth without thinking she smooths a raw spot between its ears.

[00:20:46] God damn it.

[00:20:48] The devil has bitten her. It pushes off her stomach with its clawed feet and wobbles through the melting snow. ITS BELLY swaying beneath it vanishing through the bars of the storm drain. She stares at the eerie triple imprint of its teeth already shrinking from view. The first time she thought she'd have to disguise these scratches and bruises the bloody evidence of their feelings. But by Trude on the worst of the wounds has vanished erased by some bad magic.

[00:21:17] Leaving only alerted rash.

[00:21:19] She's back in bed three minutes before her husband stirs on the pillow. Oh there you are. He says smiling. Our boy slept well didn't he. Ray's mother calls to see how things are going. Her mother would be here but she is caring for her own mother on the opposite side of the world. In a hospice facility her heart is breaking not to be with her daughter. Just as res is breaking not to be with her mother and her grandmother. The breaking is continuous in the Aruba rows of caretaking guilt and love and fear and love continuously swallow one another. I love you. They tell each other frequently on these calls. More truth won't fit through the tiny Collender of the telephone receiver. Ray admits that she is having some difficulties with nursing. Oh my God. Don't feel guilty. Her mother says give him a bottle already. You are formula fed. And look how you turned out. This is not particularly reassuring to Ray although she appreciates the impulse. There is no natural moment in the conversation to say Mama the devil has me.

[00:22:29] 16 weeks into the pregnancy Ray had received a call from a genetic counselor. Something had gone from being possibly wrong to probably wrong in her dream that night. The genetic counselor was picking out nail polish for her. This black or this black this one. In the best of circumstances a pregnancy is a walk down a gangplank but there is we're not the best of circumstances. The genetic counselor told Ray and her husband this is a scary result.

[00:22:57] She acknowledged the numbers kept changing on them one in a hundred one in fifty one in 14.

[00:23:03] Even early on when the odds were with them Ray had feared this outcome. Somebody has to be the one. With a dark egotism she felt certain that she and the baby would be this raffles winners. If you believe that. What else do you believe. A day later by the train tracks where pollen floats in a spectral yellow migration to the Willamette River two deer appear finds preceding their mother like tiny spotted footmen. It's a sign it's a sign. All will be well. And still she hears the calm dry voice inside her. If you believe that. What else do you believe. Even as a girl Ray was a terrible negotiator. She gave anybody anything they asked of her. She owed the world the world owed her. The week belonged to the strong. Her grandfather liked to say Ray never felt that she could simply take up space. One had to earn one's keep on planet Earth. As a kid Ray's body SLC absorbed the painful things that happened to it and not even an echo of certain events escaped her lips. Sometimes she thought the problem the gift she'd once believed was anatomical because she didn't seem to have a gag reflex. So none of this secret stuff the gushy black awful stuff ever came out. Now it lives insider liquefying inadmissible in digestible event. Is that what the devil is drinking. At 9 0 9 and 11th 32 and 1 19 and to afford 3 22 and 6 12 raised son wakes up they wake together her eyes flying open justice is wailing rises beside her before she knows what she is she is rolling toward his voice Knight brightens into morning and they are together for the pivot green world. The wailing is profoundly concealable. It is the question to which she is the answer.

[00:25:05] The milk satisfies hunger and thirst. It moves softly between their bodies quieting both of them. Joy has been the great surprise of motherhood. The flood of love for the baby is so fierce that she is always trying to qualify to herself hide it from her own inner sight hormones. Of course it's all hormones hormones under her chin the baby burps. He's wearing pajamas that make him look like a tiny medieval Friar. The love winging around the room scares her with its annihilating force. It's loosening the corset strings of her history. The incarcerated fat of personality she and the baby are one body again nourishing itself. For perhaps the first time in her life she knows what to do and she does it. The new moms group meets at the milk and honey co-op a cheerfully derelict store front between King of subs and the weed dispensary just minutes from Ray's house. One Wednesday at ten twenty seven a.m. she puts the baby in his carrier and walks down the hill kissing his fuzzy head every third step. Don't worry baby. She tells him this is just Anthropologie. Did you know she overhears a woman in line to buy a sack of oats telling her friend that breast milk is made from our blood.

[00:26:23] Isn't the body amazing.

[00:26:26] That doesn't sound true Ellen. The friend says with a blazing lucidity that Ray wants to warm her hands over. That's what I thought says Ellen. But Google it. Read the science. Then she winks at the cashier Nestor whom Ray knows because he works the second shift at the gas station where she buys or bought cigarettes. Nestor recognizes Ryan grins. Hey what are you doing here. This is a healthy food store. No cigarettes. She stifles the impulse to lie. I'm here for the new moms group. When Nestor raises a brow she laughs and says Yes I know I'm old old women can also be newborn. Anybody can. The new moms group sits in a circle on a faux fur rug in the homey dingy backroom. Every adult face looks freakishly huge to Ray. It's Valentine's Day a fact that shocks her. That's not the kind of time she's been keeping event. The group leader announces that they will share around the circle. OK. One of the new moms says she's a white woman wearing sunglasses and overalls and transmitting a definite hostility to being looked at like a vampire or a vacationing Olson. I'll start. My name is Lee set and I had a baby girl three weeks ago. I am wearing a diaper right now and I've been finding quarter sized clots of blood in my pants. I pissed blood when I sneeze. OK. Pass. Hello my name is Flor a hollow eyed black woman with a newborn gumming her turtleneck says this is baby Dennis baby Dennis wakes up every 20 minutes. My name is Halima. I had a C-section and now I feel like a library where they mis shelved all the books. These women's struggles are identical to raise. And yet she has to fight down her distaste. The voice that says so what.

[00:28:15] And shut up and you should be ashamed of yourself. I am a sexist. She admits to herself noting the rise of acidity in her body as she listens to the other women describe their secret torments and night terrors. My name is Rebecca. A woman around raised age says she

has smile lines in a topless blue mermaid tattooed on her left arm. Ray envies the mermaid. Gravity is on her side. Under the sea. Rebecca someone hopefully suggests Rebecca. Rebecca repeats for nearly five minutes she shares about her sciatica. Does she have a baby. This is unclear. What she definitely has is Gattaca. Little babies are yawning all around the circle held on laps and centered against chests. It's hard not to view the mothers as their large ventriloquists dummies yapping away while the babies pull the strings when they get Turei she freezes. Don't be shy Yvette says. Yvette is a mother of three or four Ray didn't catch the exact number. Her children keep running up to her and radiating off again in an explosion of organic crumbs. She wears her black hair in a high ponytail and looks suspiciously radiant to Ray. She grew up in Miami and works as a choreographer for a dance company. In all her movements there is a spirited efficiency a sort of freestyle Grace warm blooded and UN robotic. She seems to take real pleasure in helping the bewildered new mothers orient themselves in the postpartum tall grass. But she clearly enjoys her role as Yvette the veteran event the alpha mom. I'm having a hard time with night feedings Ray finally says everybody clucks advice rolls over her Ferber no cry weighted blankets white noise machines. Has she tried baby Merlin's magic sleep suit Binky loves these words and bears her.

[00:30:07] They seem to leech the intelligence from her body just as the devil leeches mineral from her bones at the end of the meeting Yvette approaches her. They stand in the B product style surrounded by castles of natural laxatives. I hope that was not too overwhelming. Yvette says Really. You just need to experiment and find out what works for your baby. The baby I love the baby. I love nursing the real baby. Ray feels dizzy from sleeplessness. She can feel herself blinking rapidly water escaping down her cheeks. Oh God. For years she was a vault but now she has a leaky mess. She can't keep anything inside herself. Not the blood ruining her underwear or her losing milk or the moisture in her eyes or the words beating on her tongue. It's not our baby I was asking about every night since I got home from the hospital. I've been nursing the devil. Ray describes the devil in a rush with a sick satisfaction its bulging eyes and the spiny paddle of its tail.

[00:31:07] The way it looks sometimes like a prehistoric Porcupine and sometimes like a sort of mutant red raccoon. Now she watches Yvette's face and awaits her reassignment from weary stranger to dangerous lunatic.

[00:31:20] Event doesn't bad a false eyelash. Indeed a look of naked exasperation flashes across her carefully made up face. That fucking thing. It's been coming south of Powell.

[00:31:35] The aisle seems to narrow and closing them in a daylight tunnel is even making fun of her. You've heard of it. Oh yeah. Two winters ago after my second daughter was born it came around every night. It moved under my house and it never shut up. She shakes her head

raised cheeks are on fire. Did you did it promise you something too. Oh that says and laughs bitterly it's certainly tried. I wasn't interested. Shame Nettles over raised school like a tight red cap. I see. Well.

[00:32:09] I bet I made a deal with it.

[00:32:12] Smoothing her hair back from her temples. Yvette fails to conceal her disappointment. She has long acrylic nails. A chic blue. Rookie mistake babe. Rookie mistake.

[00:32:25] Her whole body flushed Ray leans in to defend herself which somehow results in an impassioned defense of the very entity that is draining her life. It saved my child when he was still inside me that thing. Event laughs angrily that thing can't add a minute to your child's life and it can't take a minute away. It prays. That's all it does. It feasts on blood down the aisle events children are drawing on the freezer door with beeswax lip balm and giggling as Ray watches the older boy takes a big bite of wax and swallows. Ray look city vet with a freezing dread a melting relief. Are you sure. Because it was pretty convincing. Its eyes you see. Yes. Yes I know. Says event and the voice like appeal of thunder. Ray nods wearily. It feels like sacrilege to be discussing this out loud with someone at noon. Whatever you do. If it says don't read anything online. Those message board bitches are crazy. They'll tell you your baby is going to die and sign off with an angel emoji.

[00:33:36] That's really true. Let's look at that advice. I stand behind Yvette scribbles her number on a piece of paper and hands it to Ray here.

[00:33:46] Call me sometime You have to break the cycle.

[00:33:50] The baby is awake blinking its dark innocent eyes and now Ray worries that event is the lunatic. What is this woman saying how could she possibly advise breaking a compact with the devil. Look it's not the devil OK. It's not it's a devil. Like one of the little ones a knockoff Satan.

[00:34:11] Ray swallows her shame. It's not omnipotent it doesn't claim that but it is powerful. The thing is it knows. You really think it's reading your thoughts. Yvette. A plant could do that. No you don't understand. Ray looks down at her son's wispy head pale as lettuce with intricate blue veins. Veteran mothers seem so smugly certain of everything event with her cloth diapers and her homemade yogurt. How does a vet know for certain what a devil can and cannot do. It

can't do shit. It's not clairvoyant. It is just a rat fink with a taste for mother's milk. Yvette's daughter darts between them a strong beautiful girl.

[00:34:53] She sticks her tongue out at REI quit feeding it cold turkey. You'll see. And for a while Ray is almost euphoric with relief. But as the sun sets her fear rises while her husband and her son sleep ray reads news stories on her tiny screen read World Stories. Women in ICE detention centers separated from their children. Women in Beijing afraid to breathe the toxic air. She reads and reads until her teeth are vibrating from the sustain pedal of the tragic news cycle. The horror feels bottomless. She wonders how far afield the devil goes. Their ideals to be made all over the globe. By the time four admirals around her resolve has evaporated Ray sees that she has no choice. She has to feed it to deviate from the pattern she's established would be to risk other deviations. I'm just going to jump ahead and end on this section that I like that won't even won't even feel like an ending but I just want to end here. I thank you for indulging me.

[00:36:01] January 2nd. Dear baby you have been here long enough to accumulate dirt under your fingernails. Ray stares down at her mom's line a day journal. At some point this ad sounded like a very manageable goal. One line a day but she is seriously in the red. The last entry you are getting a tooth is followed by one month of snowy blankness. Guiltily Ray stares at all the empty days before her son's birth. She'd worked as a science journalist. This is a new kind of writer's block. February 19th. Dear baby. Today a little scratch disappeared Above your left eyebrow. All her life Ray has been rehearsing for the worst imaginable scenarios. Her fears get fact checked their validity confirmed she's written about the acidifying oceans and sarin attacks. So it's psychic whiplash to turn from these assignments to the baby's sleeping face. Cole it against her chest in a marsupial accessory recommended to her by the old moms for 49 ninety nine YouTube can convert your deflated abdomen into a pouch again. March 1st their baby. I like the way you turn in half circles on the mattress like a senile clock. The baby sounds cold today but my baby sounds too cozy leave proprietary. I am your mother. She tells him instead reintroducing herself dozens of times each day.

[00:37:29] We belong together. March 22nd. Dear baby. She thumbs through the blank pages shining in white. The happiness she feels is frightening to her. It's nothing she's ever rehearsed for. Only an idiot would try to write about it. Stop things.

[00:37:57] And if somebody brave wants to ask the first question I'd be so grateful. Yeah. Thank you.

[00:38:07] Yeah. That's a great question. So so the question is you know and I spent so much of my imaginative and real life in Florida. It's a very long peninsula it's really hard to get out of there too. And I've been living in Portland now for for you know over four years and I the first story that I set there was such a surprise to me I was so happy about it because I felt like oh this really is then becoming my home. You know I've been here long enough that it's a place that I can imagine my way into. However this is a strike at the prospectors that Rick mentioned about these women who take a ski lift to the wrong party. And thank you also Rick for not giving away there's kind of a turn and I feel like so many of their views just mention it and I'm like No.

[00:38:54] We spent so long just trying to calibrate this story so that would feel like a genuine surprise. So that that I don't read the reviews just just read the story that I worked on for months. Please feel it feels a surprise I intended for you. But I Yeah we I had gone to Timberline Lodge with my with my Miami family and you know I went with my husband who is like a child of the West. And what got us all was I mean also you know we were fans of The Shining right. So you can only driving up there in a car doesn't feel great if you remember that amazing kind of aerial shot. But what got us all was the ski lift. We were all freaked out by this in a way that everyone else seemed to feel it was very matter of fact. But it's not you guys it's really weird. It's it's a it's it's it's a bold and insane thing that you're just going to climb onto a chair and take on faith that it's going to deposit you on the right mountain or anywhere. I don't know. And then you're like take it away chair I'm just gonna come down this mountain on this would I strap to my feet.

[00:39:58] It's crazy but I mentioned this because the only way I could I could feel my way into that story I was really stuck for a long time I had to give these two grifter girls a backstory in Florida.

[00:40:10] So in very funny ways you know I do sort of feel it's still kind of kind of my hope my imaginative home but I hope I hope if I if I live here long enough and the the nice thing about this orange road story I mean I really did feel right after the birth of my son that my world shrank to like it was that really the winter two years ago. Do you guys remember. I don't I don't know how badly you were hit here in Seattle but I just thought that's what the new road would be like.

[00:40:35] I was like Oh we never see people and you know Snow had ringed us into this like five block radius around our house. So I was thinking of that kind of they're really kind of circumscribed world where yours are straight jacketed to the present and really in your neighborhood.

[00:40:54] But but I think I think for better for worse Florida influences everything I imagine.

[00:41:03] Stu Hello lovely friend. I know you're a lunatic. I was curious how many of these stories that have all been previously published and many of them have won awards on those publications were revised repeatedly before getting into the final form in the book which you actually changed during the reading too I might add.

[00:41:25] I know a little bit. Right. It's like a restless leg syndrome or something. This is my friends do who is has it describe my hit thank you for throwing the award winning in there.

[00:41:39] Yeah I'm a really compulsive revise I think a lot of writers probably are you know. And I think that this is the way we've chosen to make our OCD work for us or something you know we're all like let's just make lemonade as compulsive ruminating as.

[00:41:56] But yeah many of these were pre released previously published. And in this collection I added back some things that were cut you know some lines in some cases just just lines even that I that I missed but I had this fantasy I always do right before publishing a story.

[00:42:15] I'll get this redacted draft back and then I'll have this like Pet Cemetery of like things that were cut by magazines and I'm like oh how you know I'm like That's fine for now but one day there'll be a book and all will be restored to me like the Book of Job and then like when that time comes and I'm like yes it's time. Let me open up this document. Invariably I'm like Oh thank God you know more more often than not I'm like hats off editors. Nobody needed this like 12 page digression about the bald girl I'm like this kid's uncle you know I'm always grateful for cuts so. But in some cases I did sort of I mean I really kind of that the ending of this story the gondolier just took me a long time to get something that I liked and that.

[00:43:02] And then it's a little bit like editors join you in your mental illness for this brief window. I was comparing it to you know you go to the optician. And it's like they keep showing you different lenses and they might even be fooling you.

[00:43:15] They're like that was the same lens and you're like I think I see the e a little more clearly. No you do not. That was that. That was a trick.

[00:43:25] So the revision can start to feel like that after a while you sort of I think I'm just making lateral move sometimes I don't know that I'm improving anything. You know even though this is a long winded way of saying that they they mostly resemble the form that they were published in. But I know the Bog Girl there's some some sort of new material, The Tornado Auction, and The Gondoliers the endings I sweated those endings a lot.

[00:43:49] This is kind of like an English teacher question. All right. It sounds like what I read in Swamplandia! also from your short stories they're like classic Southern literature. They play around like William Faulkner. Is it an influence

[00:44:09] or anything like that? Oh absolutely. It's funny I just had the pleasure of talking to an English teacher who's a critic and most of his questions were like What were you what were your teachers feeding you at that time. And I'm in high school. I was just really lucky I went to this kind of big public high school Miami but it was my English teachers you know they're like You should read their Eyes Were Watching God. You should read One Hundred Years of Solitude. Flannery I didn't meet until college and that probably for the best. I mean you have to be ready but. But yeah I just I felt like I was introduced to these women writers by and large too.

[00:44:45] They just I felt a Katherine Dunn with someone I picked up her book Geek Love in high school probably because I was like this awkward nerdy person and I was like oh nerds in love. That sounds wonderful.

[00:44:56] This is a book about a family of a kind of a carnival freak freaks these parents who experimented with drugs so that their children would be freaks. And it's one of the great novels. It's a scaldingly, terrifyingly original novel and um and I think fits into that category. I mean she's she's fit Katherine Dunn is passed now. She was living in Portland. I know a lot of you probably have connections to her. But I would put under that same awning.

[00:45:26] For some reason you know even though it's a different region of and Zora Neale Hurston I just remember you know her description of that hurricane we had we had come through Hurricane Andrew and I had never seen something like that devastation rendered in literature before and sort of the attending feelings in what was sort of sublime about it in the moment and you know ghastly about the consequences. So this is like a long winded way of saying I did sort of feel like I met my four mothers at a really early age actually thanks to this like amazing public school English teacher.

[00:46:02] And you hope you hope they're mulching you somehow. You know.

[00:46:07] Hello. Have a question related to the story you just read actually orange world. When I when it was first published I think in the New Yorker and I remember I read it and I was at a similar stage. I had also just become a new mother. I remember exactly where it fell but it felt very familiar and I could just feel all this. She must've just had a baby when she wrote those and that anxiety of. You don't know what you're doing and all this worry and anxiety just anxiousness about. Maybe and what you're doing with a newborn. And so now I'm wondering now you're having number two. Do you feel like there's a different story that you would tell. Do you feel differently. Oh this is a great see yourself differently. As a mother from that mother that you were when you're older.

[00:47:00] I think it's so funny to be reading it feels a little surreal to read this story to you guys in this condition a little bit where I can feel like an actual human foot like wedged under my ribs.

[00:47:12] Oh you know it's just. All right I have this little like drum major IT JUST DIDN'T doing backup for me just.

[00:47:21] It's funny too because some of the questions I've been getting will be sort of about like realism and fantasy on this continuum. And I find them difficult to answer lucidly when there's one that I can just see a foot moving. You know it's sort of when I'm already in this Cronenberg state. I do feel it's funny that I finish that story maybe a year ago and I still felt like a very new mother at that time. You know I remember it being published and still feel like I was not had not traveled so far in the timeline from this character even though she's very different than me in many ways. And so I Yeah I maybe but this has just been my lot in this life to always feel like this bewildered kid you know no matter how old I get. And I think if I felt sort of less confused and amazed by this life maybe I wouldn't be a writer I would I would be a life coach I don't know what that would be do it.

[00:48:17] But what I have I'll tell you this is a very personal answer. I'll tell you what's changed for me now is that I have more faith that like this flood of love is going to come and that makes it easier.

[00:48:27] It makes the uncertainty easier I guess. So I have I think that that is a big change. Like I couldn't have known that before and now I feel like OK well maybe we'll be equal to this unknown future because I'm just going to have this flood of I just I just trust that that will happen. I hope.

[00:48:46] I mean so yeah I also find that I'm not sleeping at all and it turns out that's been great for a book tour because like you normally I'm so anxious I spin out about reviews or whatever and I'm like You know I just don't have the bandwidth to feel that much.

[00:49:02] So I recommend this to you guys Zurich and considering timing of publication with a with a baby because there's just sort of like them. I mean I'm in the padded house of exhaustion and it's a special protection against like a good reads review you know. Yeah. I. broke. the story of this.

[00:49:29] Very tale. Yes elements.

[00:49:32] Yeah definitely. I just feel some weird Rumplestiltskin vibes going on in there. Very strange modern Karen Russell way.

[00:49:40] Just curious if you're thinking about that all or if that crept in before you thought of it after all want to have like some kind of you the perfume that's just Rumplestiltskin vibe I can spray on all the stories I love Rumplestiltskin vibes. Yeah I think I was I really was thinking a little bit you know this story was such a news story to me.

[00:50:02] It's also like the oldest story in the world and I was grateful that there are already some other older vocabularies you know for me kind of this experience I love fairy tale in large part because it is a language that we you know we it's the first language really right that these stories that we've all known since our consciousness clicked on and just kind of ways to grapple with. Yeah that kind of profound peril and uncertainty. And I was rereading the Brothers Grimm not too long ago.

[00:50:39] I sort of forgot how the devil. What a great salesman he is. It is and how often the context for those fairy tales is economic. Right. I would be someone who's kind of come come back from war and he's penniless and he has not. His options are few and then the devil's like you know or it's someone who you know but all her sisters were like carried off by eagles in her dad's a widower.

[00:51:01] So it falls to her to you know Mary a bear or whatever but it was you know they so they had these sort of supernatural amazing twists but often it's a very earthly problem that exposes you know that makes humans vulnerable to the seductions of of of the of the darkness.

[00:51:24] So yeah I'm happy for there to be Rumpelstiltskin vibes. I'm not sure how conscious I ever am.

[00:51:30] You know in a first draft but one of the things that I was hopeful of with this particular devil he's just a devil not the devil is that it would feel kind of multiply interpretable because I felt that writing and I felt at times like this is sort of this Rumpelstiltskin figure or it's this woman's overwhelming desire to say yes you know or it's. Yeah. That the idea that like fear can be a talisman against fear somehow. And so it just it my own understanding of it kind of changes a little bit to. Yeah. she's. see.

[00:52:08] One of your stories and I'm wondering how you keep up with that. Yeah that did. You know I've been working off and on intermittently on this novel set in Nebraska. I'm like obsessed and for reasons I can't totally account for with that landscape and I went on a research trip for this novel that I pray to God. You know I finish at some point and I went with a friend of mine flies crop dusters right outside of Shadowrun in the sandhills. So I went up in his plane with him and I got to see exactly where you know the erosion line sort of become the Badlands and it's like really you know these pronghorn antelope just like flooding over the prairie. And it was awesome. And I talked to a lot of these these ranchers you know in the dirt Meridian and um and there's this man Andrew Morris. If you guys if nothing else that you take away from this evening when you go home you should google Andrew Morris photographs and he gave me it's called him Bassett.

[00:53:08] Bassett county cattle auction.

[00:53:11] And there was some weird thing happen with the exposure of his camera. So you know it's just a bunch of like pitch black cattle running in a circle but it looks like this cyclone. It's amazing it's an amazing photographs and it's a sort of dark and also hilarious.

[00:53:27] Like all of these farmers are just chewing on their pencils with total poker faces and it's like this base is roaring to life beneath them and the fencing looks totally inadequate. So for a long time this was the only framed art in my house.

[00:53:39] So there's a lot by my husband's like please can we print some wedding pictures. We're free get everybody.

[00:53:48] But it just I every I love what I love about it is it looks like some sublime weather event is coming together and the humans are just like you know they're like That's fine. We put up you know it's fenced off it's gonna be OK. You know I mean it seemed like a metaphor for any number of things to me and also just right toggling right there between kind of like clarity and horror. And so this is the so that's where that story came from.

[00:54:13] And also just wanting to try to take on a slightly different voice. This is the 74 year old retired tornado rancher who grows like literal.

[00:54:23] Tornadoes.

[00:54:27] So many of your stories feel completely unique like they take place in their own world. Some of them orange and.

[00:54:38] How how do you know when an idea is a good one.

[00:54:44] I get the feeling that you come up with like these really original unique ideas but like I'm also guessing there are some that don't work out. And how do you.

[00:54:56] You know.

[00:54:59] How do you get. How do you distinguish think it is a great question. You know I had the great good fortune to do an event with George Saunders who I really adore and he told me this thing that was encouraging to me. But now I believed to be alive. He was like the older you get the more quickly you'll learn what you can make live. You know he was like that's what he

had discovered he's like as I get older you know I just I don't spend I don't waste as much time on something I can't execute or something that I can't get off the tarmac.

[00:55:24] And I found that so encouraging this was like five years ago and I just want to call him and ask him like how old do you have to get this or like how much older for that. Intuition becomes more refined. I feel like I will sit in a plane without an engine for hours. You know really believing that we're going to Tahiti or wherever.

[00:55:45] That's a crazy analogy to say that it's not always obvious to me and I beat my head sometimes against drafts that I that but but but every every offered enough. So you know it's I don't despair entirely something that I I thought was never going to work the gondolas is a story that I you know I think I wrote the first draft of that in 2015 or something. I just I just did it. It wasn't working and I came. I put it aside and I came back to it. Maybe even like a year later or something. So but I think a good sign for me is that if I am not learning something if I'm not surprised if I don't feel like a kind of urgency if I haven't figured out how to sort of.

[00:56:32] How to take a character or a world and use my life to power it if that makes sense right. If I haven't found some sort of I'm going to say umbilicus because let's just remind you that I'm sorry guys. Have you ever some kind of connecting.

[00:56:47] Yeah. So where were the power outlet is almost so that you can plug in this story to something that that truly matters to you or troubles you or makes you OK you know then it is very unlikely. I think that a story will have any kind of impact on a reader. You know what I mean like I've just I've had I've just. I think there are stretches of writing that do feel kind of like a slog and that's to be expected. But if you're not if you don't feel that heat or that urgency yourself it's unfair to expect that a reader would feel it for something you've made. So that's one kind of litmus test.

[00:57:24] So there's a more banal question but of your short stories do you have a favorite. Or when you're most proud of. Oh.

[00:57:35] You know it's so funny. I always feel like I have to say the one that that nobody else likes. You know so I had this collection Vampires in the Lemon Grove and there's a story that it's not my strongest okay. It's called Dougbert Shackleton but then I always feel like I have to say it's my favorite because I made it up and it should be somebodies favorite. I'm like I guess it will be mine. I don't know. I don't know where that imposes. But you know it's always like the sad beast that like the the ugly stepsister that I like in this story.

[00:58:10] I was really.

[00:58:13] I don't know. Yeah. Yeah I was I was really proud of that orange world the title story because that was a new kind of challenge for me. And there were a couple like that. There's a story in here called the bad graft that I felt really happy about and that what felt scary to me about that one is it's very much about. The love between two adults. In my past work I've really focused on family and siblings and this and it's I mean it's the love and horror story. It's it's not uncomplicated for this couple.

[00:58:44] Do you get scared by your own stories. You have trouble sleeping when you're in the middle of writing them.

[00:58:50] I always want to ask Stephen King that right because it feels like how how could he possibly ever.

[00:58:57] It's interesting is I don't like scary things usually and I would never go see a Stephen King movie or read Stephen King look just because I my kids used to come home when they were in high school and say Mom don't go see that it's too scary for you. And but but I don't I love your stories. I don't find them that kind of terrifying. I don't know why except I think maybe what you just said about amazement and. wonder that there's something very innocent about the point of view of the characters so that very different ugliest.

[00:59:33] I don't know somehow. They I can I can hang in with them.

[00:59:37] I'm glad to hear that I am. I think I think stuff does scare me but not not really unlike the soft for kind of way you know like I'm I am not I don't turn out the lights and think like you know a devil is going to appear like a tree Spirit is going to possess me air an alligator is going to chomp me. You know it's nice.

[00:59:57] I think what's scary is probably what's scary for all writers is that you actually really don't know a sentence to sentence what you're going to dredge up and what's going to appear and it is a little interesting now you know I've been I've been fortunate enough to be doing this for a while. So something that scares me a little bit is e you sort of start to map out your own obsessions or preoccupations and there is some stuff that I feel like oh no not this again. You

know any where it just keeps regenerating like blood to a kite or something. You know I just sort of feel like there's a particular memory set that even if it's not explicitly. Dealt with in a story it's still somehow kind of powering the story and that's what that other is scary right. That is a little scary to feel like you know this sort of damages the state over a lifetime and the secret life it continues to have. And what a strike and speed up is some of that sometimes know.

[01:00:52] So another author that I really like Victoria Schwab talks about how well she's writing. She can't read a lot because that comes through. She's afraid in what she's working on but when she's not writing she always tries to keep that well filled and whether it's with nonfiction or fiction or whatever it is. So just how does that work for you. Can you Can you read while you're working on your own work or do you have to keep those things separate and if you do either at a separate time or while you are you. What do you really like to read in in kind of fill yourself up with.

[01:01:26] Right. You know it really depends. I mean when I was working on humbling India everyone told me that I should read. Peter I'm always afraid to say his last name. He's a genius. Peter Matthiessen. You guys know he wrote that Killing Mr. Watson trilogy and so I started to and then it was just too good. You know it made me I was just like Well no I mean. So I think. And it felt so close actually in it. It felt a little too close to what I was working on. And so there I just felt like I was in danger of just like writing a bad plagiarism of the Killing Mr. Watson trilogy. You know this book that's also set in the Everglades and I was working on this section in that kind of historical called the judgments revelation ancient. It just felt too close. So I tend to stay away from stuff that is like that where the overlay you know where where you do feel like I will now just you know. Right my own bad. It'll be like bad karaoke if there's nothing better bunch you know. But I read a lot. I read a lot when I'm writing and it helps me sometimes if I was stuck.

[01:02:32] I think I read I was trying to do this kind of multiple perspectives story which was a little new for me and I was reading Shirley hazards the transit of Venus which is amazing poetry I think is amazing teacher for fiction writers because you have to really kind of pay attention to like the way language pulses kind of word to word.

[01:02:55] I read know I read it. I read my friend's book sometimes because I don't get to see them that often and then it's like inviting them to haunt you. Kerry McCue is a friend she's this amazing poet she wrote American gramophone it's the epigraph of this book or Rivka Chan is a friend and she has a book actually if there are any any people kind of in the new new baby landscape it's called Little labors.

[01:03:20] And that was a big inspiration to me when I was having a really hard time writing again because the book just encodes like insomniac mom brain. There's lots of whitespace there's lots of associated leads. But poetry especially I find if if you need to cast a spell on yourself and have your faith restored that language can really do something. One more I feel like you. get to the. punchline. but I was thinking how how does poetry influence and. inspire your writing and possibly.

[01:03:53] Who's and why. Yeah. Oh man. Where to begin. There's a port riding right now Morgan Parker who I think is incredible. And I think what part of it is I'm I'm like this. I'm like a glutton for metaphor it captures of this place and her.

[01:04:14] Yeah. Her ability to sort of use metaphor I think is unparalleled.

[01:04:19] And she has a book right now out Magical Negro. It's also her experience. There are places where our experience overlaps and there are places that it's it's Morgan's voice and Morgan's vision and so that's a pleasure right. I mean I think every reader knows that. It's such a joy to kind of get out of your own perspective and you know a tiny kingdom of your skull.

[01:04:43] And the poets too I often feel like I'm a failed poet.

[01:04:47] Like if I could do that magic I would because you see that it will be like a completely unique capture of this place. It will be you know there'll be some kind of marriage of words that like if I was the minister officiating the marriage like a thought I would would never even occur to me. I was just rereading The Autobiography of Red. Do you guys know this book by Anne Carson. It's a novel. It's I think one day when Knopf first got it no one knew what to do. They're like oh no you know. They called it a novel in verse but it's it's so deeply weird and original. And I think it helps too because you get out of sort of like the rut of your own syntax of thought you know there's something about line breaks even where you have to make it's good for stories because you have to make these these leaps between images and emotion and it's you have to kind of think about how things are constellated you know how they're juxtaposed. So it's not quite the same as sort of like the Clydesdale you know the forward tilt of battle of an op ed or it just like Clydesdale blinders on you know some certain kinds of argument you have the freedom to kind of you know do these Tarzan swings around and that end up mapping a different kind of truth in a poem. This is a crazy answer I'm sorry. Tommy Pico. I don't know if you know him, wonderful poet Elizabeth Bishop always. Yeah. Do you put



[01:06:10]. The story aside?

[01:06:15] Very very case by case I think always there's a period where I have to put it aside because I'm like scarlet or red and making everyone around me insane. I think I'm supposed to close, close it down now guys. Thank you so much for coming.

[01:06:31] Applause.

[01:06:36] 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.

