

## Literary Conversations: Escape

November 23, 2020

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation celebrates literature and fosters connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

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You can also purchase Margaret Atwood's [Dearly: New Poems](#), Rion Amilcar Scott's [The World Doesn't Require You](#), Nisi Shawl's [Everfair](#), and Morgan Jerkins' [Wandering In Strange Lands: A Daughter of the Great Migration Reclaims Her Roots](#) from Politics & Prose.

**Bethanne Patrick:** Hello everyone, and welcome to PEN/Faulkner's third Literary Conversation of the season... My name is Bethanne Patrick. I'm the Programs Committee Chair at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and I'm so excited to have you all here tonight.

For those of you who are joining us for the first time, what you need to know – what you should know about the PEN/Faulkner Foundation is that we're a non-profit literary organization based in Washington, DC with a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire individuals and communities.

We fulfill our mission by administering two national literary awards – the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story – as well as through our education programs, which bring free books and author visits to DC public and public charter schools.

Our Literary Conversations series, which starts its last iteration of the season tonight, is on an all-new virtual platform, so please let me give just a couple of notes about the webinar. There will be a short Q&A session at the end of the event, so please submit your questions using the Q&A button on the bottom of your screen. You can also upvote a question someone else asks if you were intending to ask the same one, and we'll do our best to get to as many as we can in the time we have.

We're very proud to have adopted a Pay-What-You-Will model for our Literary Conversations in order to increase accessibility to our programs during these tough times. If you are able, please consider making a donation to us through the link we'll put up in the chat. Any amount you give will go directly towards ensuring that we continue to provide high quality programming for our audiences across the country.

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It's time to get this conversation started, and we're so honored to have some amazing panelists tonight for Escape. I just can't wait to tell you about them, and you'll see them on your screen in just a couple of minutes. I'm going to go alphabetically by author and then introduce our moderator.

First, Margaret Atwood, whose novels include *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, is also a poet whose new collection, *Dearly*, was released this month. And Margaret is one of the few figures in 20th and 21st century writing who is just as amazing as a poet and as a novelist. I hope, if you get a chance, you'll check out *Dearly* and maybe want a copy of that for your own.

Rion Amilcar Scott, who lives here in DC, had a debut collection that came out, *The World Doesn't Require You*, and that reimagines the history of a small Maryland town very much like the one he grew up in. He has a story called "Shape-ups at Delilah's" in this year's Best American Science Fiction anthology.

Nisi Shawl writes speculative fiction as well, and their 2017 novel, *Everfair*, is an alternate history of Nigeria. This year, they've edited an amazing anthology called *New Suns: Original Speculative Fiction by People of Color*, and definitely another volume to check out.

Now, last but not least, is our moderator, Morgan Jerkins. She has a new book called *Wandering in Strange Lands: A Daughter of the Great Migration Claims Her Roots*. And Morgan also has a debut novel coming out in early 2021 called *Caul Baby*. It's going to be a must-read of 2021, I am sure.

With that introduction and without further ado, I'm going to turn this over to Morgan Jerkins. And we're all going to be involved in a conversation about Escape that I think will be lightening and entertaining. Thank you, Morgan.

**Morgan Jerkins:** Thank you so much, Bethanne. Thank you so much to all of you who decided to join us tonight to focus on the theme – topic of escape, which, during these unprecedented times, is very prescient, I may say.

So, to start us off, I thought that we would start with a reading from each of our panelists. So Nisi, would you mind starting us off?

**Nisi Shawl:** Not at all. I'm going to be reading from *Kinning*, which is the sequel I'm working on to *Everfair*. And it's from the viewpoint of one character that was also in *Everfair* – Tink, a Chinese-born railway worker who becomes an inventor and engineer in *Everfair*. And he's up to something a little more nefarious in this section. I will also say that I usually – I made a vow to sing whenever I read, so I'm just going to do a short 2-bar piece here.

[Singing] We're sending out a major love and this is our message to you.

**Nisi** reading from *Kinning*:

Between the homes of collaborators clustering near the palace's walls they walked, quickly, quietly, avoiding the treacherous gravel-strewn entrances of the more elegant establishments. Then these were left behind. Removing their lone, light sponge from his shirt, Tink lowered it to soak in a puddle of water and activate. He squeezed out the excess water and returned it to its former home, his body and clothes serving as its

shade. They should not rely on their eyes alone. It would be best to frame their perception in the fashions nourished by the spirit medicine while on this mission.

Soon the tingling air of the woods encroached more closely, and soon after that, it enveloped them. Tink wanted to rest here, to lie among the enchantingly damp, fallen leaves as if he, too, had come to the exact right place. But the road, the mission, the spores, the target. At last, they'd reached the target. Fragrant new-turned earth steaming with life sat wetly mounded over the trench in which the cable traveled from its landing station in the bay to the terminal house on the forest's far side. He waited for Ragu, who lagged behind the twins and their captives.

"Tools?" He asked. From a sling over his left shoulder, the man removed a pair of collapsed shovels. Unfolding the one handed to him, Tink sank it into the soil. He directed the [unintelligible] to start digging a few paces further from the road. The actions he performed were pleasurable, sinking in the shovel's blade, lifting out the muck of knowledge, heaping it up next to one serenely expectant hole after another. He couldn't delve too deeply. The hole's round sides wanted to melt and sag. But the spores' emerging tendrils would sense their goal and stretch down to reach it.

**Morgan:** Thank you so much, Nisi. Rion?

**Rion Amilcar Scott:** Okay. So, I'm going to read the first story in my second collection, *The World Doesn't Require You*. It's called "David Sherman, The Last Son of God." I was challenged to write a story using an already pre-existing character. So I used God. It starts with a quote from the Lincoln catechism.

**Rion** reading from *The World Doesn't Require You*:

Thou shalt have no other God but the negro.

God is from Cross River, everyone knows that. He was tall, lanky; wore dirty brown clothes and walked with a limp he tried to disguise as a bop. His chin held a messy salt-and-pepper beard that extended to his Adam's apple. Always clutching a mango in His hand. Used to live on the Southside, down under the bridge, near the water. Now there is a nice little sidewalk and flowers and a bike trail that leads into Port Yooga. Back then there was just mud and weeds, and He'd sit there barefooted, softly preaching His word. At one time He had one hundred, maybe two hundred—some say up to five hundred or even a thousand—people listening. But the time I'm talking about, He'd sit with only one or two folks. Always with a mango, except during Easter time, when He'd pass out jellybeans to get people to stop and listen.

He lived on the banks of the Cross River until one day, He filled His pockets with stones and walked into the water and sank like a crazy poet. He wasn't insane. It was all part of God's plan. Last time He was crucified, this time drowned. Anyway, God can't drown. He'll come back, perhaps to oversee the writing of another Testament or to judge the living and the dead, whatever He feels.

This story, though, isn't about God. It's about one of His sons. Not His son in the metaphorical sense—well, he was, as we are all the children of God—but more so he was His son in the physical sense.

David Sherman was God's last son. The youngest of thirteen. Five different women had lined up to sire the children of God. They were all boys except for the fifth, a disappointment who, at the age of twenty-five, seduced her fifteen-year-old younger brother with her shapely behind and left Maryland to build a sinful life with him. God could have had more children, but He got a message from Himself after David was born to stop spilling His seed into His servants. Who was He, or anyone else, to argue?

David lived with his mother, Violet, in a one-bedroom apartment on Sally Street that teemed with water bugs and mice but rarely any rats. God slept there sometimes, but not very often He'd rise long before the sun and He'd tell His boy, God Morning to you, son.

David would reply, And God Morning to you, too.

He stopped spending the night after David turned twelve. To David, God was a disappointment. God told His son things from time to time, things about virtue and the coming Holy Ghost Testament, but never anything David could understand. He wondered if one day he'd lose his mind and be out on the streets speaking an incomprehensible Gospel like his Old Man. And when David was sixteen, God took His own life.

**Rion:** Thank you.

**Morgan:** Wow. Thank you. Last but not least, Margaret? [pause] You're on mute.

**Margaret Atwood:** There we go. Okay. Thank you very much. Those were very interesting and made me want to read the books. And that's what should have happened.

So this is the beginning of *The Testaments*. The speaker is Aunt Lydia, who we know from *The Handmaid's Tale* as being really quite unpleasant, but now she is speaking herself. She's still unpleasant.

**Margaret** reading from *The Testaments*:

Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified.

This statue was a small token of appreciation for my many contributions, said the citation, which was read out by Aunt Vidala. She'd been assigned the task by our superiors, and was far from appreciative. I thanked her with as much modesty as I could summon, then pulled the rope that released the cloth drape shrouding me; it billowed to the ground, and there I stood. We don't do cheering here at Ardua Hall, but there was some discreet clapping. I inclined my head in a nod.

My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I've been for some time. I am standing straight, shoulders back, my lips curved into a firm but benevolent smile. My eyes are fixed on some cosmic point of reference understood to represent my idealism, my unflinching commitment to duty, my determination to move forward despite all obstacles. Not that anything in the sky would be visible to my statue, placed as it is in a morose cluster of trees and shrubs beside the footpath running in front of Ardua Hall. We Aunts must not be too presumptuous, even in stone.

Clutching my left hand is a girl of seven or eight, gazing up at me with trusting eyes. My right hand rests on the head of a woman crouched at my side, her hair veiled, her eyes upturned in an expression that could be read as either craven or grateful – one of our Handmaids – and behind me is one of my Pearl Girls, ready to set out on her missionary work. Hanging from a belt around my waist is my Taser. This weapon reminds me of my failings: had I been more effective, I would not have needed such an implement. The persuasion in my voice would have been enough.

That was nine years ago. Since then my statue has weathered –

[coughs] One moment here.

– pigeons have decorated me, moss has sprouted in my damper crevices. Votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feet: eggs for fertility, oranges to suggest the fullness of pregnancy, croissants to reference the moon. I ignore the breadstuffs – usually they have been rained on – but pocket the oranges. Oranges are so refreshing.

**Morgan:** Thank you so much, Margaret.

**Margaret:** Lydia is quite old.

**Morgan:** [laughs] Thank you for that. Thank you, Rion, also, and Nisi, for your reading selections.

The way I want to start off is just what I think is most personal on everyone's minds – is the pandemic. You know, we're now at a moment where over 250,000 American lives have been lost. There's been rampant negligence by the outgoing administration. And I'm wondering, as speculative fiction writers, those who look towards the future and also towards the past, how has this unprecedented time made you rethink, reconsider, or maybe reconfigure any of your stories or stories that you're thinking of writing, but might have changed because of the times?

**Rion:** Yeah. I think it's been a huge emotional rollercoaster, this whole thing. I mean, my view on it and how I'm approaching it in my work is just – it changes month by month, you know? Initially, I think as a reaction to everything that I felt I lost, I'm going to jump into this and I'm going to write about this. And I started - I threw everything to the side and I started writing a novel about - that was directly related. But everything started changing so dramatically and rapidly day-to-day. And it just struck me, just made me

realize that this thing is so big that it needs time to digest, you know? And I need to actually think about it. So I wisely put the pandemic novel to the side, the horrible pandemic novel I was writing to the side, and just decided I was going to sit back and observe.

**Nisi:** Yeah, I have not included the pandemic itself in anything that I'm working on. It's definitely changed the way that I work, but it has not contributed to my storyline, although what I'm writing about is sort of an infectious empathy. So, having an infection going on in my novel, there's all sorts of tugs from reality pulling the story in different ways.

The next short story I'm working on called "A Merman I Should Turn To Be," and that has - it's been shaped by one of the effects of the pandemic, which is the highlighting of the destruction of Black lives by people in authority in the US, at least, and the movement for reparations. I'm using that in that story, yeah.

**Morgan:** Wonderful.

**Margaret:** You're wondering about me?

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Margaret:** I think I'm older than everybody on this panel. So, I'm wondering how many people remember the time when there were just about no vaccinations that you could get? So quarantine was just kind of normal and people were afraid of polio and smallpox and diphtheria. I had four cousins die of diphtheria and whooping cough and German measles and on and on. And it was the '50s that brought in a lot of those vaccinations. And I'm also old enough to have parents who went through the 1919 flu, which was really spectacular, killed a huge number of people and some of them very rapidly. They would collapse on the street and blood would come out of their ears, if you can imagine. And people were just not - they weren't ready for that one, either.

And since that time, we've had SARS, but that was fairly contained. It had a pretty short incubation period and people got onto it pretty quickly, but we've also been really worried about things like Ebola and Marburg. So this is not a new thing, pandemics. If you look in the bible, you'll find some. And if you look back in Greek history, you'll find the mention. We're not sure what they were, but they killed a lot of people. And then there was the 14th century with the great mortality which killed half the population of Europe and, on this continent, they figured that probably 90% of the original inhabitants who had no immunity to European diseases were wiped out.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Margaret:** So this is not a new thing for humans, but it's new for this generation. So it's really new for kids who had the vaccinations, weren't afraid of getting polio or diphtheria or any of those things, because there were vaccines for them. So it's been very shocking for them.

And I think that the pandemic novels, when they come, are going to come from a generation younger than mine. Anyway, I've already [written] a pandemic trilogy, but it

was a different kind. It was much more thorough and it was manmade, and that's pretty scary, too, because we, as human beings, do have the capability to do that.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Margaret:** So that's the field. And if you talk to the epidemiologists and the historians, they will point out that way many more people have been killed by contagious diseases than have been killed in direct combat and warfare.

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** So it's a human thing. And guess what? We're human.

**Morgan:** Right. Yeah. One of the biblical references I thought of when I was reading some of your interviews, Miss Atwood, is there's nothing new under the sun. Everything that we're going through now has a historical precedent. And so for those of you, even if it's not a pandemic that you've seen before, or the flu, any other types of, you know barriers, oppression, terrible administrative laws -

**Margaret:** Yes, we've done it all.

**Morgan:** Right. And I'm wondering, you know, does that make you feel a bit of disillusionment? And if it does, does that ever affect your writing?

**Margaret:** No, it does not, because along with those stories, which are terrible stories and, you know – go back to World War II, which killed more people than any war that we know about ever, and awful things went on, you know, the camps and the, you know, people who had disabilities just being killed by the Nazis and on and on, there's also, at the same time, these stories of astonishing courage, astonishing heroism, people combating those things, people helping.

So no, it doesn't. It's not – because it's not all one-sided. And if it were all one-sided, we may not be having this conversation.

**Nisi:** Morgan, your quotation is actually - I include it in *New Suns*. There is nothing new under the sun. This is from Octavia Butler, but yes, there are new suns. So yes, these stories and these events are a repetition of – the flu pandemic, in particular, is on my mind – and our reactions to them can be different, can be changed, I think.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Nisi:** Hopefully for the better. We'll see.

**Morgan:** I hope so. Rion, did you have anything you want to add?

**Rion:** You know, I think that we've weathered these things before and we weather, you know, like you said, horrible administrative failures, and some people won't weather. Some people will not survive a lot of these things that have been foisted upon us and that we've foisted upon ourselves, but I think one thing – good things that have come out of this, I necessarily had to think back and say, what positive has come out of this? You

know? And I think from small things to large things, I think a lot of us have been able to look into ourselves and become more introspective and get to know ourselves a lot better, and I think as a society, you know, it's going to allow things to fall away that are not serving us and hopefully we're smart enough to be able to move in a better direction.

So, you know, I don't think we necessarily have time to be disillusioned, you know. We have to think about a lot of the positive, whatever positive can come out of this, you know.

**Morgan:** Yeah, yeah. I want to pivot a little bit, because I want to talk about the intersection of two topics that are very prescient to me personally – advanced technology and exploitation. And the reason why I wanted to talk to you all about it is, you all explore it in your works and I'm thinking about now – riffing about Amazon, these new robot dogs that they have coming out, and I literally saw an episode of “Black Mirror” that talks about robot dogs. It was very scary.

And so I wanted to talk about, particularly in your work, when you talk about the perils of this, yes, we're advancing, but what is at odds? Like, how do you do that in your fiction where you know that capitalism is a part of our lives and it's something that we can't 100% disentangle ourselves from, but how do you think your fiction mitigates that or explores that?

**Nisi:** I'll go.

[laughter]

How does my fiction mitigate the dangers inherent in the expansion and growth of technology? It gives it new stories to follow. It gives it - I try to write really hopeful stuff. For instance, in *Everfair*, technology is actually kind of a hero. People are using microscopes to look at microorganisms. They're using - because they're in a landlocked country, *Everfair* is landlocked, they use what they call air canoes to do trade routes. They have guns that throw knives and they steal plans for guns that can do this, like, as if they were machine guns.

So, it's just a question of who is telling the story and who benefits from it that I concern myself with. I don't concern myself with, like, saying that technology is bad. Technology is part of the story.

**Rion:** Technology is definitely not bad, but, you know, the book is a technology. Right? And that's made our lives so much better.

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Rion:** I think we always have to think about where, you know - how much - what parts of us is going to be in the technology? I've written two robot stories in my books and I'm writing another robot story right now, but I'm thinking about – even if the technology eventually separates itself from us in some distant future, its origin is us. Right? And we have to start thinking about – are we replicating systems of oppression? Are we replicating racism? There are all of these stories about how, you know, they programmed



AI and the AI turned racist. It's not that AI is inherently racist. It's that the people are not really thinking - people programming it in the beginning were not really thinking about some of the implications of it learning from people who are putting out racist ideas.

I read an article today about perhaps in the future, AI coming up with, you know, the ever-elusive theory of everything and how, you know, it is going to be based on uploading the ideas of us, of people, of the great thinkers and the great minds or whatever. But you know, we have to think about how we're uploading our blind spots as humanity. And that's what I think our stories should be thinking about. And it's not necessarily saying technology is bad, you know? It should be saying, you really have to think about the implications of what parts of humanity are going to be in this technology.

**Nisi:** The algorithms. The algorithms need to be seen as stories.

**Rion:** Right. They're not neutral. They really are not neutral, even if the people who program them initially said, you know, you think of all this math or it's a series of steps. A series of steps is really based in what we know and what we understand and our limits as well.

**Margaret:** Well, well, going back to Marshall McLuhan who said any human technology is an extension of what we want to do, what we do and want to do. So, binoculars and cameras are an extension of our eyes and radio is an extension of our voice and ears. And so on. So it is all stuff we want, because if we were giant spiders, we wouldn't be wanting those things. We would be wanting super delicious flies and better labs and things like that, but we are not giant spiders, yet. So the things, the technologies we invent are all things that human beings want to do.

The catch is that not everything that human beings want to do is super delicious, wonderful, good. And the other catch is that any technology, beginning with fire, anything we come up with always has a good side, a bad side, and a third side I call the stupid side of things we didn't anticipate. So, some side effect we hadn't even thought about. And they all have that. So, a hammer, you can build a house with it, you can kill somebody with it, and you can use it in a game show. [laughs] Who even would have thought of that when inventing the hammer?

So that's who we are, and we kind of can't avoid that. And I guess the best thing we can do is be aware of that, the fact that any technology we come up with is going to have a less desirable side to it and another side we didn't even see coming. So when they invented the internet, it was scientists who said, won't it be great that we can communicate our wonderful scientific ideas among ourselves in real time? Yes, let's go for it. And now look. And now look.

**Morgan:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** Some really good things and some really terrible things. I just saw the latest election and all the - well, I call them lies. Why not? All the lies that were circulated around via the internet.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh. Nisi, I wanted to go back to something you just said. Algorithms have stories. Can you elaborate? Because that's a very powerful line there.

**Nisi:** Well, I tend to think that people, that humans need stories, and we find them in everything. And so algorithms are stories and should be seen as stories. The algorithm that says you will be reaching out for and anticipating trouble from people who are in a certain neighborhood, that is a story. And it is a story based on past experience, but whose past experience? Who was telling the story? Because if you had someone else telling that story, the trouble might have been seen to arise in a different neighborhood. Or based on something besides geographical location, such as income.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh. Absolutely. And so I can segue and talk about my next question, ambition or the limits of ambition, because another thing I found in your works is there are these individuals that have these grandiose ideas. They have this intention to improve society or improve it for a certain set and then, as Margaret said, there are some unforeseen things that begin to take place. And, you know, we often find stories like this. Many people are harmed. And so I'm wondering, you know, as you're continuing to create, do you think that there's a way to, again, mitigate that? Like, do you think there's a way where we can have boundless ambition where you're not inadvertently hurting certain groups of people?

**Margaret:** So, how to make humanity better? [laughs] Sends shivers up my spine, because the big totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century all began as utopias. So they all came in saying, we're going to make things just so much better. Trust us. We're going to make things so much better. But first we have to get rid of those people. And there's always been a "those people" in those schemes. And excuse me for saying so as a Canadian, but the great American western expansionism was kind of the same.

**Morgan:** Yes.

**Margaret:** There was a "those people." And Canada was no different, except the "those people" were different from the other "those people." And the "those people" move around, depending on what country you're in and who's feeling in an empire-building mode. But there are always – there's always a promise of more, greater, wonderful, more perfect, and there always seems to be this undesirable side of who you have to get rid of first. Get rid of or control or, you know, dispense with or put somewhere else. You can see that in these schemes. So I tend to worry about utopias and anybody who's read a lot of the field of speculative fiction knows that the 19th century was a great producer of utopias, and then that turned in the 20th. You're going to get a lot more bad societies than good ones being written about, because people lost faith in the infinite betterment of everything. They'd seen people promise it and then fail spectacularly.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Margaret:** But you can't give up wanting to do better. That's not good, either. You sink into corruption. So, wanting to do better, but possibly not with a grand scheme that involves getting rid of "those people."

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Rion:** I think one of the things that we've seen in the last, I don't know how many, years is the idea that we can just focus on science and math and technology and not think about the implications that history and literature have always thought about. And I think that if you're picking out – if you're demonizing or mocking or, you know, the humanities, then you're going to have problems. And I think we've seen that. I think we see people who don't really know or understand the implications of what they do. They have these theories and slogans, move fast and break everything, and we have to disrupt and disrupt, without thinking about the implications of what that disruption does and thinking about ways that you're going to mitigate it. These things have been predicted. These things have been thought about. The ethics, you know, people are discussing them, but if you take that out, if you ignore that, or if you cultivate people that don't have any appreciation of that, then you're going to have problems. And I think that's one of the things that we've seen.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Nisi:** Both my novel, *Everfair*, and the one I'm working on, the sequel, *Kinning*, are about would-be utopias. In the first one, in *Everfair*, there are these – Fabian socialists get together with a bunch of Christian missionaries. Right? [laughs] I can see Margaret face-palming. Yes. And of course, there's upheaval and clashing when they each try to promulgate their own version of what utopia would be.

In this one I'm working on now, there are actually two sort of super organisms. I won't say much more than that. But each one of these is supposedly key to a certain kind of utopia. I like to have people striving for a utopia and not getting there. And I think that that's the best case scenario, is that you are trying, you want to make things better and you fail. But hopefully, that's a good failure.

**Margaret:** But how badly do they fail?

**Nisi:** You mean badly as in terms of how many casualties?

**Margaret:** Well, badly in terms of the collapse of the Third Reich.

**Nisi:** Oh, yeah. No, they never get that far.

[laughter]

**Margaret:** Oh, they don't? That's good. So they have moments of sadness and self-realization, but they don't want to burn Paris to the ground?

**Nisi:** Right, exactly. Or if they do want to, they can't.

**Margaret:** They can't, yeah.

**Morgan:** Wow. I want to direct these questions particularly to Rion and Nisi in regards to Black history and speculative fiction, because, for example, Nisi with *Everfair*, you're talking about the Belgium Congo. You're talking about colonialism, stuff that even many

people today are discovering the magnitude of how terrible it was. And with Rion, when I read your book, I'm thinking about all-Black towns and thinking about how many of them don't exist anymore.

**Nisi:** Anymore.

**Morgan:** Yeah, anymore. And I'm wondering, because we're still discovering things about Black history, Sophia Cartman calls it the silence of the archives, how do you maintain sensitivity to so many things you might not be able to know while also breaking out and trusting your imagination at the same time?

**Rion:** I found my imagination is not as wild as I thought it was. There's so many things that I've written and they are real. They've actually happened. For instance, my neighborhood was founded by, the neighborhood I grew up in, or parts of the neighborhood I grew up in, were founded by freedmen. I didn't know that when I started my project. My stories are founded in this town that was founded after the slave revolt. And you know, I didn't know that. And there's this bridge in my neighborhood that separates - that historically had separated the Black side of town, which is where I grew up in, and the White side of the town.

And you know, I didn't know this. I wrote about a bridge and it was in my excerpt that I read, you know? But I always knew that they had problems with us crossing the bridge. I didn't know that it was rooted in the history, you know? And so, you know, I think that there are things that we feel that I think we're going to keep discovering. When I write these, a lot of times when we write these things that are imagined, I think that - and then the archive becomes - starts speaking, I think that, you know, our work is a comment, becomes a comment on what we don't know and what we don't know consciously, but what we know intuitively.

We know more than we know. And I think your book speaks to that, Morgan. Your book speaks to that, about how we know more than we know, your last book and how we feel it and, you know, and it guides us throughout our journey.

**Nisi:** Yeah, I don't know. I think I come at it the other way actually, I'll be doing all of this research and that will spark my imagination rather than imagining things and then saying, oh, whoa, that actually happened.

**Morgan:** Wow. And this question is for you, Margaret. I mean, you have a legion of fans. You probably have more legion of fans with *The Handmaid's Tale* on Hulu, millennials and perhaps Gen Z-ers, too. And so I'm wondering, you know, ever since *The Handmaid's Tale* came out on Hulu - and I'm not going to lie, I saw a tweet, there is a rumor months ago that there was going to be a vaccine coming out with a company called Gilead. A lot of feminist friends were freaking out about it. It was kind of spooky, but it was kind of bizarre. And I'm wondering, do you feel like if you get any fan mail or if you talk to any feminist that they perhaps depend on you a little bit too much to guide us, to be like a seer and to help us into the future or anything like that?

**Margaret:** Okay, so nobody is perfect. These are my faint [unintelligible], you know, so let's dial back in time to when I first wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*. So we had had second wave feminism, which became public about '68, '69, and had a very energetic run in the '70s and then kind of fell apart. There was some in-fighting. People got tired. But gains had been made, particularly in laws. So laws had been changed. Gains had been made. Powers had been acquired that hadn't been there before. You could get a mortgage. Hey, you could have a credit card. Wow. Stuff like that. But it was far from over.

And then in the '80s, there was a backlash. So we had the election of Ronald Reagan. We had the appearance of a certain kind of so-called religious right. They started saying the kinds of things they thought should happen. And having read *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's book, which people were saying, oh, he's just fun. He's not going to do any of that. Wrong. I think people do say what they would like to have happen. I think when somebody says they want to cut off Dr. Fauci's head and put it on a pike, they would probably do that if they had the chance. I believe that. I believe people when they say those things.

So they started saying these things about women, and I thought, well, if you want - if you think women's place is in the home, but they're all running around out there having jobs and bank accounts and stuff, how are you going to get them back in the home? How do you dial it back?

The second question, if you're going to run a scheme like this, under what flag, as it were, would you run it? Would you say hi, my name is Bill, I'm a communist, you should all follow me? Not likely in the United States. They wouldn't get enough adherence. But if you said, this is the will of God, a lot of people would put up their hands for that.

It is still a nation that was founded in the 17th century and a big part of those founders were the 17th century Puritans, and it was not a fun time for women in that time and place. So I built the book on that in the 1980s. And then I thought we would move away from that. I thought we were moving away from it in the '90s. The iron curtain went down. Hooray, hooray, it's all going to be global. We'll just go shopping. History is at an end. All of that was wrong. Everything just went underground.

And then along came 9/11. Big shock. Along came the financial collapse, 2008. Big shock. Those kinds of things make people scared, angry, and when that happens, you have a populism or you move back towards the right. And then, you know what happened.

So *The Handmaid's Tale* started being filmed as a series in 2016 before the election. We [were] in the middle of filming it when the election happened. Nothing changed. The scripts did not change. The series launched in 2017 and instead of it being a fantasy of something that didn't happen and wasn't going to happen, and dodged the bullet of - thank heavens for that - that was not the atmosphere that the series appeared in. So instead of being viewed as a fun escapist romp, it was viewed as, here it comes. And I think it was the confluence of events, none of which I had any control over. So I didn't do

it. [laughs] But that was the result and that's what made it such a phenomenon, and I'm not happy to say that.

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** If I had a choice, you know, things could have been otherwise and then it would have been a fun version of something that didn't happen. If I could have that choice, I'd take it.

**Morgan:** Wow.

**Margaret:** You know?

**Morgan:** Wow. Wow. That's not the response I expected. Because a lot of times, writers are, I'm glad I want my project to succeed, I want it to reach unimaginable heights, but you're having to start with, not really.

**Margaret:** It still would have succeeded, because it's a good show, but it would have been viewed differently. So the frame around it, the frame around it was created by the history that actually happened.

**Morgan:** Absolutely.

**Margaret:** And you all know, because you're writers and readers, you all know that the way that we view any work of art, there's always a frame through which we're looking at that, and that frame can change. So, something that we might have thought was just wonderful when we were 16, at a somewhat later date, we may think, hey wait a minute. I have a different frame now. I'm seeing it differently. That happens to all of us, and it keeps on happening, and that's good, because if it didn't keep on happening, the work would be static, and so would our frame. The frame would just be paused in time.

**Morgan:** Absolutely. Wow. And just piggybacking off what you were saying about, believe people what they say, I'm thinking about the power of language, especially under the Trump administration. And I'm thinking about your work as well as Rion's work, and Nisi, you can definitely jump in here. With the fall of liberal arts institutions or the precariousness of liberal arts institutions, it's been talked about in *The Chronicle*. It's been talked about in *The Atlantic*. And I'm thinking about the proliferation of fake news or, again, when people don't believe information that's been spread to them. As you called us writers and readers, do you often sit back and say, I told you so. I knew this was going to happen. People don't read the books or people don't read their history or things like that.

**Margaret:** No. We've been there before, so part of World War II and part of World War I, as far as that went, and part of the lead up to World War II, it was all a propaganda. Big propaganda wars going on. There's a difference in the way it's disseminated now, but the intention is the same. So either to get people to believe in something that's not true or to confuse them so much that they don't know what to believe, and that was the stated aim of the Russian disinformation campaign in the 2016 election. So, confused people so much. Is this true? Is that true? Is this other thing true? Is that other thing true? Who can

tell me? I'm not going to believe any of it. A lot of people have just stepped back from the category called truth. But that's not a good answer, either. Why did I even say either? That's not a good answer. So we need to get back to – who's going to level with us? Who are the trusted sources?

I tend to trust sources that have an address, because you can sue them. [laughs] So if they get too far off it, you can call them out and that might actually have an effect, whereas if it's somebody pretending to be a rabbit on social media, you've got no idea who that person is or whether they're just pretending to be a crazy lunatic to make other people look bad. We just don't know.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Rion:** Yeah. This is a real crisis in critical thinking in our country and in the world, I think, and I think a lot of it stems back to, you know, the idea that acquiring knowledge has to have a purpose, you know? It has to have a goal, you know, a capitalistic goal and it has to - you know, it's only worthwhile if it's going to make your life - if it's going to get you a job. And that becomes, you know, that becomes a real problem, because then people are only interested in acquiring the knowledge that is going to, you know, immediately lead them to something the next day, something - a job the next day. And so it becomes about training rather than about thinking.

And so, you know, I think we're seeing the fruits of that. We're seeing, you know, a love of conspiracy thinking. We're seeing people, like Margaret said, throwing up their hands. I don't know what to believe. We're seeing a lot of people with false equivalency. Both sides are wrong, without thinking about the moral dimension of what - of any issue. The moral issue becomes more so like - the strategy works, then it's right. And I think it all has its roots in that not focusing on thinking.

**Margaret:** We're worried about educational institutions, but they're not the only places where thinking can take place.

**Rion:** Uh-huh.

**Margaret:** Educational institutions toss out the humanities, that will not destroy them. It will not destroy the kinds of, you know - it won't destroy people writing books. It won't destroy people reading books. It won't destroy people talking about books. You watch. Supposedly there were none left. Somebody would invent one, or two or three or five.

**Nisi:** I don't think – I don't expect critical thinking from people, from any people. If it happens, it's a bonus, but I don't expect it. And I have several friends that are completely outside the critical thinking, including in that several friends who I met personally, who I know who are Trump supporters. Okay? And I mean they are, like, all about Trump. And one of them, you know, I stay in touch with them via special media. One of them posted something about how all the Democrats want to do is, like, mess up the world and kill babies and drink blood. And I said, hello! Yoo-hoo! Me here. I'm a Democrat. And then she said, well, not you.

[laughter]

**Nisi:** What does that have to do with critical thinking?

**Margaret:** Where does the blood drinking come in?

**Nisi:** You know, I missed that part. And I'm a vegetarian. [laughs]

**Morgan:** Oh, my God.

**Margaret:** Are we back in the land of vampires or is there some other thought going on here?

**Nisi:** I really don't know where she got her meme from, but it was totally not about thinking rationally.

**Margaret:** So it was about name-calling. So really, probably what you should - what one ought to ask people who are going way over the top like that is, what are you afraid of really? What are you really afraid of? What do you think people are going to take away from you? Do you really fear that they're going to drink your blood? Is that it?

**Nisi:** [laughs] Well, this is someone who – I can talk with her about other things. We can talk about ferrets, for example.

**Margaret:** Ferrets?

**Nisi:** Yes.

**Margaret:** Ferrets? Ferrets drink blood.

**Rion:** Do they?

**Morgan:** I don't know.

**Nisi:** But anyway, that is my illustration of, like, that is not something that I am looking for from people that I interact with. It's nice when it happens and it is -

**Margaret:** Yeah. I would really like to be able to follow the path of thinking, the path, sort of the lily-pads hopping from one idea to another, like how they got there. What was the big -

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** What is the [unintelligible]?

**Rion:** A lot of these ideas - I'm sorry.

**Margaret:** Go ahead.

**Rion:** A lot of these ideas, like blood drinking, they sound like re-purposed anti--Semitic tropes and all that. It starts in dehumanization.



**Nisi:** It's definitely dehumanization. What this person fears, that's a very good question, Margaret. I will try and find out more about that. By the way, this person is Jewish, observant. Right? I know.

**Morgan:** Wow. You should drop it in like another mic drop. Man.

So we're going to get into the Q&A portion, because we have a lot of questions from some super fans.

Ben Pitfield for Margaret. He asks, you are a prominent writer of both fiction and poetry. How does your approach to writing differ depending on the genre you are working in and does your framing of the world differ between mediums?

**Margaret:** Well, okay. Let's talk about wave patterns. So, take a novel. So the wave patterns are quite long and, you know, separated. The peaks of the waves are separated. So something may come up on page 50 that has a reprise on page 170 that has another reprise on page 390. So, the waves like that.

Short stories – the waves are closer together. It's a more condensed form. And lyric poetry, it's even more condensed, but it's also probably closer at the brain activity level to music, I would say. That's lyric poetry. I'm not talking about epic or Milton. So, short lyric poetry, it's very condensed. So if you think about a little bit of sugar in the bread dough as compared to a chocolate. So, like that.

How do I differ in my approach? Well, because novels are long, you have to work at them, but you all know that. It's work. A lot of it is just work. You are laboring away at it and people respect that, because you look as if you're working. [laughs] We have a culture that respects - people look as if it they're working. Right?

Whereas poets don't often look as if they are working, and they can be, therefore, quite annoying to those around them. Somebody might say, why don't you mow the lawn? I'm working. But you're just looking out the window. Yeah, I'm working. So like that. I think poetry takes place in a much more condensed time frame. It doesn't look like work to those observing it, and poets are generally thought of as being weirder than novelists are, so I've always felt that I could balance out my weirdness by writing novels, whereas if it was just poetry, and people did used to say in the '60s, they didn't used to say, are you thinking of killing yourself if you were a woman poet. They were saying, when are you going to kill yourself? Because you somehow weren't serious, unless you did. But that was then. I'm sure it's not true anymore.

**Nisi:** Can I just say a couple of things about the contrast between poetry and novel writing? I started out as a poet and have been writing novels for, like, a decade or so. I thought I wasn't the same person long enough to write a novel, and I was pretty sure, because of that condensed time frame you're talking about, I was pretty sure I could be the same person long enough to write a poem.

**Margaret:** Yep.

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** And do you still write poems?

**Nisi:** Uh, no.

[laughter]

**Nisi:** But I do still look out the window when I'm writing a novel, and people may not think I'm working.

**Margaret:** Yeah, but how about those piles of paper to show that you are?

**Nisi:** True.

**Margaret:** Keyboarding that you've been doing. Are you now the same person long enough to write a novel?

**Nisi:** Yes.

**Margaret:** Huh.

**Nisi:** But maybe not a trilogy. I don't know.

[laughter]

**Morgan:** Man.

Stuart Phillips, he poses a question to all of you. Stuart Phillips asks, between our pandemic and the current society, how much further do you have to push to get beyond the realistic?

**Margaret:** Yeah, that's a problem. Yeah. So, essentially, I'm sure all of us share this feeling, if you can think it, somebody has probably done it. And when you're writing a novel, you really have to tone it down. You have to tone down reality, because reality is so much more over-the-top once you start delving around in it. You say, oh, surely they didn't... Yes, they did. I put that in a novel, everyone would just say, this is just too over-the-top. It's too melodramatic. It's too exaggerated. It's too harsh. They would say all of those things, and they have.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh.

**Rion:** I tell you what, writing satire has just become definitely impossible. [laughs] You know, the abandoned novel – abandoned for now – novel that I was writing, you know, was satirical. I had a thing about a guy, when the mask mandate started to come down, about, you know, someone being angry about that and wearing a Klan mask to the grocery store. The next couple of days, that actually happened. And I was just like, man. You know? What am I supposed to do here?

So yeah, I don't know how to solve the problem. I think the problem is to just, you know, just realize that you're going to be outpaced by reality and figure out where to get wilder and where to, as Margaret said, to pull it in, because a lot of times you put something in there, you know, and it just looks too wild.

**Morgan:** Wow. Yeah. I'm actually - I'm trying to dabble in historical fiction, particularly the antebellum era, and I was interviewing an historian on American slavery and I was asking him some questions about, you know, what all did plantation owners do? Because I wanted to know my limits. And he was like, literally anything you can think of, most likely someone has done. And so that was really damning to hear, but it's truthful.

This question is coming from - I'm sorry if I mispronounce your name - Esha Senchaudhuri. Thank you for that question on points of interrogating utopias. A lot of people use idealism as an antidote to hopelessness. Her question to you all, is there a happy medium and what does that look like, if so?

**Margaret:** Huh. Yes, there is a happy medium. What do the rest of you think?

**Nisi:** I didn't hear part of the question. People use -

**Morgan:** Idealism as an antidote to hopelessness.

**Nisi:** Oh, an antidote. To?

**Margaret:** Hopelessness.

**Nisi:** Oh. I think there's a happy medium in that it's a process. It's not an end. You have to keep revisiting your ideals, too. And it really helps to get other people's input on your ideals rather than just holding them to yourself. It's like, check with other people. What is this? Am I doing the right thing? Am I causing harm somewhere?

**Margaret:** Undoubtedly.

**Nisi:** Sorry?

**Margaret:** Undoubtedly one causes harm somewhere, without knowing it, undoubtedly. But it might not even be to people. It might be to tadpoles.

**Nisi:** True, true. And I'm not saying stop if there's harm. I'm saying find out what it is.

**Margaret:** Yeah. That can be an endless process.

**Nisi:** Yes, exactly.

**Margaret:** That's a problem.

**Nisi:** I don't think it's a problem. I think it's a good thing that it's endless.

**Margaret:** Okay. So just to - books have endings and life doesn't.

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** Lives do, but life so far, anyway, goes on.

**Nisi:** Yeah.

**Margaret:** So we think, well, there should be a happy ending. But that's in books. You can get a moment where things are pretty good, where things are in balance, where

more people than ever are having a decent kind of life. You can have moments like that. They won't necessarily last. That seems to be one thing that happens. But just to have those moments is still pretty good.

**Nisi:** I think so.

**Morgan:** This is from Amanda Liaw. This is a question posed to all of you. What about speculative fiction as a genre allows you to explore the topics you want that you wouldn't be able to otherwise?

**Margaret:** Okay. Somebody else first?

[laughter]

**Rion:** I'm sorry. Go ahead.

**Nisi:** You, you.

**Rion:** I like the idea of getting outside of the possible - and that just allows for a different - to reframe your perspective and your thinking. You know, sometimes we are bound by what we think can actually happen, and I've found in life that, you know, that's very limited. That's a very, very limited thinking. And what we actually think is possible is - what's really possible and what we think of as possible are two completely different things, and so in speculative fiction, at least for me, it allows me to reframe my mind and get out of myself.

**Nisi:** And I would extend that to the past as well. I would say that speculative fiction, and in particular, the branch that I seem to be working in a lot, alternate history, gets me outside of just the tyranny of what we supposedly are told - what we're told has supposedly actually happened.

**Rion:** Uh-huh.

**Nisi:** So the future is full of potential and the past is full of potential, and so hey, the present, too.

**Margaret:** So the thing about the future is that there isn't one. There isn't one. There are many possible futures, but there isn't one preordained fated history that we are doomed to enact. So the future is the future is the possible futures. And if you're writing about a possible future, you're seeing what that would look like if you went down that particular path. So it's like those plays in which you get a series of doors, but you don't know what's going to be there if you open one of them, but I have to open one. What's it going to be like?

So it allows you to enact, as it were, and live through a possible future, and then you and the reader both can decide what you think about that. Would you like to live in that future? Maybe not. If not, take a different path and open a different door.

**Morgan:** The next question is from Madison Yost. She says, or she asks, rather, how do you actively write about marginalized groups without perpetuating the stigmas and

stereotypes surrounding them? What actions do you take to bring light to these issues without further excluding these groups from the human?

**Nisi:** I just spent 18 hours teaching about this. [laughs] So my short and somewhat flip, but serious answer, is buy my book, *Writing the Other*, because that will tell you how to do it.

[laughter]

**Margaret:** And what sort of push back did you get?

**Nisi:** Push back from people who think they don't need to care about this stuff?

**Margaret:** From the students.

**Nisi:** Oh, what push back did I get from the students? None. They lapped it up.

**Morgan:** That's good.

**Nisi:** They did all the exercises. They were very pleased. But these were people who already wanted to do this stuff.

[pause]

**Margaret:** Somebody else?

**Rion:** Yeah. I think that's - I think that that's something that I'm always thinking about, because I'm always writing about oppression and that sort of thing. There was one story in my book called "Rolling in My Six-Fo'," and it plays with a whole lot of stereotypes. The project of that story is to put the stereotypes there and mock them, but I was very scared of this story. It took me 10 years to get it right. So I think it was just about, you know, taking time, you know, and making sure that things are in their proper context, and if you're writing outside of your identity, to really be thinking about - really be engaging with people outside of - that share that identity, whether it be reading their works or actually knowing them, you know, and not thinking that you're coming in as some sort of Superman in order to save them, because you're not.

**Margaret:** Well, okay, I'll just say a little thing here, that the literary life, if you like, is like a spotlight on the stage. And some people may be in that spotlight. They may be visible. They may be the well-known writers of their time. So in the '50s, they were pretty much all men, but they're not the only people in that stage area. There's a lot of other people, but they're in the wings waiting to come into the spotlight. And when you do come into that spotlight from a marginalized or previously overlooked, non-represented or under-represented group, you're quite likely to get a lot of criticism from people who belong to that group if you write your characters as human beings with flaws, because they will feel - and this happened in the big era of Jewish writing in North America - they will feel that you are criticizing them and they've had enough of that already. So they will feel that you are helping the people who would be against them, that you're helping those people by creating characters that have human dimensions and flaws.

So I think it's a sort of double burden to bear that you are going to get some criticism from the very people that you hoped to be representing in a fully human way. Does this sound in any way real?

**Nisi:** It does, and criticism is good.

**Margaret:** Criticism is sometimes good, but if the criticism is unrealistic, that is, you should only show one of these people from this group as an angel, a super human being, somebody without any flaws, I don't think that that kind of criticism is helpful, because all human beings are fallible.

**Nisi:** Right. That just perpetuates a different stereotype.

**Morgan:** Uh-huh, uh-huh. Daniel Herrar, asks how are you all reading lately? Do you tend to read more super recent or recent works or is it only me who is grasping for answers of immediate events?

**Margaret:** Recent or super recent? Yes. I read some very super recent books. In fact, I read a lot of books that haven't been published yet.

[laughter]

**Nisi:** Why is that?

**Margaret:** Let me give you one guess.

**Nisi:** Blurbing.

**Rion:** Blurbs.

**Margaret:** I don't do blurbing. I do tweeting, but not blurbing.

**Nisi:** Okay.

**Margaret:** The difference is that tweeting is publication, so anybody can quote that if they wish. Whereas a blurb is a tailored piece written just for that purpose, and I would die if I did that, because the pile of manuscripts would be this big. So in my whimsical God-like way, goddess-like way, who knows what I may read next? I don't.

[laughter]

**Nisi:** I read both recent and really old things. I read things for blurbing, because I do not have your stature, Margaret, and I am, like –

**Margaret:** I'm warning you. Don't say – No, no, you don't. But once in a while, you might.

**Nisi:** But I also have been reading, because I write a column about Black science fiction authors. It's called The Crash Course in Black Speculative Fiction or something like that. I can't even remember the name of my own freaking column. [laughs] And so I have to read, you know, things like Martin Delany's *The Huts of America* from the 19th Century and things like that and write about them.

**Margaret:** Well, you're going to be super-duper well read.

**Nisi:** Probably.

**Margaret:** You already are.

**Nisi:** Thanks.

**Rion:** I read indiscriminately. Do you see that bookshelf? I have not read most of those books. [laughs] And that's just a portion of my books, every writer has that. So you know, I have a pile. So I read indiscriminately. I read for blurbs and I just, yeah, I'm just pulling off and looking at, hey, I bought that 10 years ago. I need to read that. That's how I am.

**Morgan:** Wow. The last question I'm going to ask is from Sara Kline. She writes, thank you all so much for your time tonight. I was curious if you can see any specific tenets that mark your current writing? Themes or ideals you find marking all of your work right now?

**Nisi:** Yeah. [pause] Oh, you want to know what they are?

[laughter]

**Morgan:** Yes, please, if you'd be so kind.

**Nisi:** Yes. Almost all of my work seems to have to do with community. I'm sort of on a campaign against individualistic writing. So it's all about people working together.

**Margaret:** And does it always work out?

**Nisi:** Well, no, of course not! [laughs] That's why it's a novel – there's change, yeah.

**Rion:** I feel that. One of these things about writing is that I love seeing the patterns emerge, you know. So it's a way of getting to know yourself better. And so, you know, my first book was either a lot of father and child stories and that doesn't seem to be the case with the second book. You know, I write a lot about rebellion. That's always there. But you know, it's whatever I'm obsessed about is what is going to be in there. My obsessions are going to change from time to time.

**Margaret:** Well, not in fiction so much, but I have had an awful lot of requests over the past year, almost a year, what's it like in the pandemic? I think you've probably all had those requests, too. Write us a piece about, particularly around March/April/May, there was a lot of, tell us what's going on in your life because of the pandemic. But, you know, what do writers do anyway? They sit in a room by themselves and talk to people who aren't there. [laughs] It's not any different. It's just that a lot of people who aren't used to that find themselves doing it.

**Morgan:** Wow.

**Rion:** We're all writers now.

**Margaret:** In that way, yes, we are.

**Morgan:** Well, Nisi, Rion, Margaret, thank you for your time and your insight and your brilliance tonight. Next up, I'm going to introduce the Executive Director, Gwydion Suilebhan.

**Nisi:** Bye!

**Margaret:** Pleasure, everybody.

**Rion:** Good night, it was wonderful.

**Gwydion Suilebhan:** Hello, everyone, and thank you so much for joining us. Thank you to our amazing panel of writers for the gift of their time tonight. Thank you to our moderator for being here. And most of all, thanks to you, everyone out there, for joining us, because we really couldn't do this without you. It isn't complete unless you're part of the conversation. We wouldn't do anything, couldn't do anything we do without the contributions that you make. So I want to drop the link to donate back in the chat just for a second.

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