Literary Conversations: Virus

October 19, 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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Bethanne Patrick: Hello everyone. Welcome to PEN/Faulkner's second Literary Conversation of the 2020 fall season. We're talking tonight about VIRUS. My name is Bethanne Patrick. I'm the Programs Committee Chair for PEN/Faulkner, and I am so excited to welcome you all here tonight. We've got a stellar panel for you, but a few things before I introduce the panelists.

For those of you joining us for the first time, what you should know about PEN/Faulkner is that we are a non-profit literary organization based in DC with a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire individuals and communities. We fulfil this 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 educational programs, which bring free books and author visits to DC's public and public charter schools. Our Literary Conversations, of course, are sort of the fun side of programming, and we're on a virtual platform for the second time and just delighted to welcome people from all around the country tonight.

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 up-vote favorite questions. For instance, if someone's asked what you want to hear already, we'll do our best to get to them in the time we have.

We're very proud to have adopted a Pay-What-You-Will model for these Literary Conversations in order to increase accessibility to our programs during these uncertain and troubled times. If you're able, please consider making a donation to us through the link we'll put up in the chat.

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Any amount you give will go directly towards programming [for audiences across the country] and our programs in schools as well.

We'd also like to thank Politics and Prose, our bookselling partner for these events.

And now, without further ado, I'd like to introduce you to tonight's three panelists for VIRUS. Lauren Beukes is, as well as the author of *Afterland* (her latest novel), the author of the critically acclaimed *Broken Monsters*, an international best-seller; *The Shining Girls*; *Zoo City*, which won a 2011 Arthur C Clarke Award; and *Moxyland*. She worked as a journalist and a showrunner on

a really big animated TV show in South Africa. And she's also worked on an award-winning documentary and wrote *Fairest:The Hidden Kingdom,* which is the *New York Times* best-selling graphic novel. She lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and she's joining us [at] 1 am, so we are really grateful to Lauren tonight.

Next, we have Emma Donoghue, who is a two-time Irish immigrant. First, she went and got her PhD at Cambridge University in England, and then she moved to Ontario – London, Ontario – where she lives with her partner and their two children. She also migrates between genres, from literary history to biography to short stories, and fairy tales, and many other things. She's known for her novels, which ranges from the historical like *Slammerkin* [and] *The Sealed Letter* to contemporary books like *Landing* and *Stir-Fry*, and maybe best known to many people who are watching tonight for *Room*, which was a *New York Times* best-selling book of 2010, and a finalist for the Man Booker, Commonwealth and Orange prizes. And she's here tonight to discuss, among other things, her latest novel *The Pull of the Stars*. So great to have Emma with us as well.

Finally – well, not finally, but finally – of the three panelists, we have Stephen King. We're so excited to have him with us tonight. He was born in Portland, Maine. He was brought up in Durham, Maine, and he's with us tonight from Maine. He divides his time between two towns in that state – Bangor and Center Stovall. And he spends his winters in Florida, that lucky duck. He, of course, is the best-selling author of many novels that I'll list in just a second. But he and his wife, Tabitha Spruce, also have three children, about whom they are just crazy – Naomi Rachel, Joe Hill, and Owen Philip. They also have four grandchildren, but I should mention that everyone in the King family is a writer of some sort, all the members of the family.

So, *Carrie* was not his first major success, but it was published in 1973. And that was the book that allowed Stephen King to leave any other kind of work behind and work as a novelist full-time. So, his career since 1973 has only gotten bigger and better. He left Maine for Colorado for a short time, but it was a very fruitful time, that's when King wrote both *The Shining* and *The Stand*. So, we're going to be talking, I'm sure, about *The Stand* tonight.

Now, he is providing scholarships for local high school students, contributing to many local and national charities. He's the 2003 recipient of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, and the 2014 Medal of Arts. There are so many things that he's done, and I know that this bio is not doing him justice, but I hope that he will forgive me for that.

Finally, our moderator is another great friend here for PEN/Faulkner, Daniel Pink. He's the author of six provocative books about business and human behavior. They include longtime best-selling *New York Times* best-sellers, *When* and *A Whole New Mind*, as well as the number one *New York Times* best-sellers, *Drive* and *To Sell is Human*. His books have won multiple awards and have been translated into 41 languages. And have sold more than 3 million copies. He lives in Washington, DC with his family. And now I'm going to ask you, Daniel Pink, to take it away for a conversation about VIRUS.

Daniel Pink: Okay, thanks Bethanne. Let's talk about virus or viruses, and let's bring on our distinguished panel who has already been introduced. I see Lauren is on, and Emma is on, we're just waiting for Steve, maybe the connections are… There he is! All the way from Maine.

So, thank you for that lovely introduction, Bethanne. Thanks to everybody out there for joining us today. And thank you to PEN/Faulkner for what you do to promote reading, to promote literature, to promote the life of the mind. Thanks, also, to my local independent bookstore, Politics & Prose, here in the nation's capital, Washington, DC. If you want to order any of these great books, order them from Politics & Prose.

So, let's get started here to talk about viruses, but let's get a sense of where our panelists are, both geographically and emotionally. So what I'd like to do is go around the horn and ask each of you, what has living through this pandemic been like for you, and how has it affected your writing life? Let's start with the person furthest away, at least from me, which is Lauren in South Africa.

Lauren Beukes: It's been rough, but I mean I have a house, I have a home, I have all the food I need to eat, I have an income so it's been okay. But South Africa faced a very, very hard lockdown. At one point, we were living through a prohibition where you weren't allowed to buy alcohol, which I understand because it lowered, like, trauma cases at the emergency room. You also weren't allowed to buy cigarettes, which didn't make any sense, especially because that's such a taxation, you know, benefit. So, it's been very strange. People have masked up early, we've been really good about that, mostly. And it's not politicized, so it's really strange to see what's happening in the States right now, to see people fighting over a mask.

Daniel: And what about your day-to-day life, doing your work as a writer?

Lauren: I've been struggling to write, but I've started getting back into it. I think it's also like trying to get back into a routine, and I moved house in the middle of a pandemic. I've got a 12-year-old kid, so, all of those parents out there know just how bad Zoom schooling is, and the horror of that. She's now back at school and it looks like our schools are okay, so that's been good. And I'm getting back into the writing. It's like, me getting back into reading to be able to get back into writing.

Daniel: Interesting, okay, fantastic. So, let's go to Emma in Ontario. Where in Ontario are you?

Emma Donoghue: I'm in London, Ontario.

Daniel: In London, Ontario.

Emma: Yes, halfway between Detroit and Toronto. We're in the middle dangly bit, you know?

Daniel: So the differences between Detroit and Toronto in response to this pandemic, though, are far greater than the geographic distance, but Emma, so what has the pandemic been like for you? How has it affected your day to day writing life?

Emma: I'm really sheepish to admit that it's been fine. Of course, I've missed travel and all that, but daily life has been fine. Our city has not had it bad… Canadian social cohesion and

compliance, I've never felt more grateful for. I've never feared that people were going to be coming past the house with flaming torches. So, things have been good, and I'm so enjoying writing a musical, because I'm so sad about theatre being currently dormant that I feel writing a big budget musical and promising myself that a time will come where it could be theoretically put on to a huge crowd of people.

Daniel: Are you writing the music and the…?

Emma: No, I'm writing the words only.

Daniel: Words, okay. So, that's ambitious, writing a musical for a pandemic. Is it about…?

Emma: No, it's not about the pandemic, no, a complete break from the pandemic.

Daniel Pink: Okay. So finally, dangerously close to Canada in Maine is Stephen King. Stephen, how have you been faring during the pandemic? How has it affected your day to day life?

Stephen King: Well, writers self-isolate anyway when they're working on a book, and when this thing hit, I was working on a book and I was having a kind of a tough sled, I'd say, with it. And all at once, the country locked down, I think, reluctantly by our president, who kind of had to weigh dead bodies against the economy and kind of came down on the side of the economy for way too long. But the thing about the pandemic and being isolated was that all at once my book started to go much better, because I had really had no distractions, except for streaming services like Netflix and Hulu on TV.

To me, the interesting difference, and the reason why there has to be, God, please some kind of national mandate on how to deal with this thing, starting with masks and going on to social distancing, was when it got heavy. When it really started to come down and get bad, I was in Florida, and going to the supermarket in Florida in February and going to the supermarket here in western Maine in July and August were entirely different responses. The social distancing was enforced, there were actually lanes in the supermarket, like a one-way street – you couldn't go two ways, you had to follow. And everybody here was wearing masks, and I'm very careful about that because my daughter is immune deficient. So we have to be careful with her, and, frankly, my wife and I are no spring chickens, I know I look like Tom Cruise at 25, but it's – when you get older, it's a little bit tough, you have to be careful.

Daniel: Sure, okay. Well, I'm glad that all of you seem to be faring reasonably well, some of you are getting work done. I know that for any writer, it's always a struggle, but with a double layer of the pandemic, it's a double struggle. So what we want to do here is…what we're going to do is all of these people – what a stroke of luck – have written novels that have to do with viruses. And what we're going to do is we're going to have each of them read a short section of their book, and then we'll talk about – why do we write about viruses? Why do we write about illnesses? What does it tell us about the human soul? What does it tell us about storytelling?

And what we're going to do – so fascinating that these books – we are going to go chronologically. So let's start Emma, with you, this wonderful book, *The Pull of The Stars*, which has allowed me to dine out on the factoid of where the word influenza comes from, for many

months. Emma, why don't you set up the reading that you're going to give us and then read away.

Emma: Sure. It's Dublin, the beginning of November 1918, and a doctor called Kathleen Lynn and a nurse Julia Power are doing an autopsy on a freshly dead patient of Julia's.

Emma reading from *The Pull of the Stars*:

[Pregnant women have] sky-high morbidity, even for weeks *after* birth, [said the doctor,] which suggests their defences have been weakened somehow.

I thought of the old tale of Troy, Greek soldiers dropping out of the wooden horse's belly under cover of night and throwing open the gates. Betrayed by one's own side. What was it Dr. Lynn had quoted [to me] about [us all living in] an unwalled city?

She cut [now], she scooped; I labelled, I bagged.

She grumbled: So many autopsies being industriously performed all over the world, [Nurse Power,] and just about all we've learnt about this strain of flu is that it takes [about] two days to incubate.

Aren't they any closer to a vaccine, then? [I asked.]

She shook her head, and her loose braid leapt. No one's even managed to isolate the bacterium on a slide yet. Perhaps the little bugger's too small for us to see and we'll have to wait for the instrument makers to come up with a stronger microscope, or possibly it's some new form of microbe altogether.

I was bewildered [by this] and daunted.

All rather humbling, she added ruefully. Here we are in the golden age of medicine–making such great strides against rabies, typhoid fever, diphtheria–and a common or garden influenza is beating us hollow. No, you're the ones who matter right now. Attentive nurses, I mean–*tender loving care*, that seems to be all that's saving lives.

Emma: Thanks.

Stephen: Thank you.

Daniel: So, what's extraordinary about this novel, which came out just a few months ago, right?

Emma: July, it was meant to come out next year.

Daniel: Well, there's an author's note – you have a book that's set in Dublin in 1918, during another epidemic – and in the author's note, you… Tell us about your thinking of why you set your novel in that time, and then tell us a little bit about the decision to get it out in this red-hot moment here.

Emma: Yes, it's a pure fluke, I'm afraid. I wrote it in 2018, inspired by the centenary of the 1918 flu pandemic, with no thought of contemporary relevance at all. I just thought it sounded like an interesting cultural moment to write about, the kind of almost post-apocalyptic atmosphere of a modern plague, a modern electrified city, grinding to a halt. So I finished it in 2019, sold it to my publishers, and they said, "Oh, let's try and avoid the Trump election as a publishing season, let's publish it in early 2021," and I said, "Fine, fine." So I delivered it on the third of March this year. And then I kind of looked up and noticed the headlines, but I still didn't link it to my book. You know, a book is like this little private madness, you know? And then my publishers about the start of April got in touch and said, "Let's rush it out in July as it's finished, all we have to do is copy edit it."

And I'm very lucky, I have a copy editor at Little, Brown anyway, who is an emergency room doctor. So she quickly put my medical mistakes through the wringer, and I also hired a midwife to give me that perspective too, and they brought it out in July. So the whole thing has been a bit of a shock for me. Yeah, and I didn't add anything contemporary, the only thing I changed was that in the writing of the book, I had used the word epidemic, even though it was a pandemic, because pandemic seemed like a bit of jargon that only scientists would use, but by the end of March, pandemic was just the most routine word, so that's the only thing that I changed.

Daniel: Yes, speaking of words, I have to say I was fascinated by where the title comes from, because the title comes from the very word, influenza. Tell us about that, and then we'll move on to Steve.

Emma: The story goes that it's medieval Italy and they believed the flu was caused by the influence of the stars, so literally the influence of stars on us. And, of course, the title is a dangerous choice, because as soon as I had chosen *The Pull of the Stars*, I realized I'd have to have a scene where you can see some stars that I've never seen on a roof. So, everything followed from there. And it's also a little nod to Seán O'Casey's play, *The Plough and the Stars*, because that was the first thing I ever saw set in the Dublin slums, where most of the patients in this book come from.

Daniel: Which is, I think, important in understanding pandemics and viruses and so forth. Thank you, Emma. Okay, so let's move on, so we're going to move through time – we were in Dublin in 1918 – now, let's move to Steve and *The Stand,* which came out… I want to talk about this for a moment, Steve, but it came out originally in 1978, I think.

Stephen: Yes, that sounds about right.

Daniel: So we're moving into sort of 20th century America and then, well, what ends up being the charred landscape of 20th century America. So, Steve, why don't you… I know which scene you picked, which I freaking love, so why don't you set that up for us and read it for us, please?

Stephen: Well, actually, Daniel, I changed my mind. I'm going to read the whole book.

Daniel: Right… [laughter] it'll be the longest Zoom conference ever in the history of humankind. I mean, I've enjoyed this book, because I get, like, a little workout each time I pick it up.

Stephen: Reminds me of a critic's description of James Michener's book where he said, "I have two pieces of advice. The first is, don't read it. The second is, if you do read it, don't drop it on your foot."

Anyway, *The Stand* is about a super flu virus, and there's a patient zero who escapes a bio-warfare laboratory, his name is Charles Campion, and he gets sick and crashes at a gas station in Texas. The people there are infected except for one of the protagonists, but the person who interested me was a state trooper who stops by and the state trooper becomes a vector. Like whoever left Washington state after coming in from China. There has to be a vector. Once it gets out, you're in very bad trouble. So, this is the reading – the cop, Joe Bob, has stopped a salesman for speeding and let him go with a warning, and the salesman's name is Harry Trent.

Stephen reading from *The Stand*:

Harry Trent stopped at [a Texas] café called Babe's Kwik-Eat for lunch… He had a slight cold, and he [had to keep] sneezing and to spit. In the course of the meal he infected Babe, the dishwasher, two truckers in a corner booth, the man who came in to deliver [the] bread, and the man who came in to change the records on the juke. He left [with] the sweet thang that waited [on] his table a tip that was crawling with death.

On his way out, a station wagon pulled in… the driver, who rolled down his window to ask Harry how to get to US 21 going north, had a New York accent. Harry gave the New York fellow very clear directions on how to get to Highway 21. He also served [the New York fellow] and his entire family their death-warrants without knowing it.

… That night, the New York family stayed in a Eustace, Oklahoma, travel court. Ed and Trish infected the clerk. The kids infected the kids they played with on the tourist court's playground–kids bound for west Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee. [His wife] Trish infected the two women who were washing clothes at the Laundromat two blocks away. Ed, on his way down the motel corridor to get some ice, infected a fellow he passed in the hallway. Everybody got into the act.

Daniel: Was the word "superspreader" around when you first wrote this?

Stephen: No.

Daniel Pink: Now but that's what it is, really quite remarkable. And the virus in your book is a deadly virus. I mean, it's essentially a death sentence for everybody who contracts it.

Stephen: Instead of superspreader, I call that chapter Chain Letter, which is the way a chain letter works. You get one and you send it to seven people and those seven each, send it to seven more, so it's 49. And it's supposed to go that way, and chain letters don't work but a chain letter like COVID-19, or the super flu in this book, they work just fine.

Daniel: Now I'm curious about if there was any impetus beyond telling an amazingly good story in that book. And I'll tell you, this is something that I've been thinking about for a while – it's

going to show my age, and I'm going to take the opportunity to ask this question. I'm old enough to remember that, like, in the late 1970s there was something called Legionnaires' disease, which seemed horrible in the United States, like it ended up killing maybe a few dozen people, if I'm not mistaken. But it was one of those things… I was a kid at the time and it seemed kind of terrifying to me. Was that at all the impetus for this?

Stephen: No. My idea came from a chemical spill in Utah, and I read about it. There were some canisters that dropped out of a truck and a couple of them broke open, and they killed a bunch of sheep, they killed 200 to 300 sheep, but if the wind had been going the other way, there was Salt Lake City, and that immediately [got me thinking] about this idea.

Daniel: Yes, okay, so, that's another virus and another pandemic. Now we're moving through time, we're moving geographically to another continent, we're off of North America, so, Lauren Beukes, your book, *Afterland,* is set in the near future, although it's a pretty near future, which is kind of alarming. So why don't you set up your reading and tell us and go for it, I have a couple of questions for you about this.

Lauren: Sure. So, I just want to say that, to Emma's point earlier about the word pandemic and epidemic, when we were doing the back cover blurb, I had the word pandemic in and my publishers were all fighting with me. They were like, no one knows what that word means. It's too scientific. And now, yeah, it's the number one word we do know.

So, there has been a fairly unscientific plague – I'm sorry, it's not very credible – but which kills 99% of the men and boys. It's a flu, which has been going around the world for about 20 years, which I kind of based on HIV/AIDS, which has apparently been around since the '50s. And then it just became a stealth killer. It's suddenly a death and it becomes a very aggressive prostate cancer. It kills 99% of the men and boys left in the world. And Miles is one of the genetic survivors, he's not the [unintelligible] of men, he's not the savior of men, he's not Jesus Christ, he's not Harry Potter, he's not the chosen one, even though he might like to think of it that way.

And his mom is trying to get him to a place of safety, busting them out of, like, this luxury-like facility where they've been kept and having experiments done on them. And she's just trying to get home to South Africa, which is the home of her heart and where her people are. So this is a scene just after her American husband has died, and they've left his body behind. The plague-o-nauts have come to pick him up and they drive them to the airport, they're going to go home. And this is from Miles's perspective.

Lauren reading from *Afterland*:

He doesn't want to go home. All his friends are almost certainly dead. Not the girls, obviously, [but] who knows? His best friends, Noah and Sifiso and Isfahan and Henry and Gabriel and all the other boys in his class. Grandpa Frank is dead. Mom didn't even get to say goodbye to Grandpa, except over Skype, because they were stuck here, and Grandpa Frank was back in his house in Clarens by the river. His art teacher Mr. Matthews, Uncle Eric, Jay, Ayanda, the funny crossing guard at the school, his favorite cashier at Checkers, the one who looks like Dwayne The Rock Johnson. Dead-dead-dead. All dead. The Rock, too.

… The doors swish open and they step into the Departures hall. The shops and cafes are all locked up, although it's those see-through shutters, so you can make out the empty shelves, or mostly empty. There are lots of magazines, but no food apart from a ripped packet of chips spraying orange triangles across the floor. A notice at the cash register with a sad-face emoji reads, "Sorry! Hand Sanitizer Sold Out!"

The frozen baggage conveyor belts are curled up on themselves like dead millipedes. What does Sifiso call them back home? *Shongololos.* Sifiso is from Durban, where they get so many, you have to sweep them out of the house every day, but sometimes they're only playing dead to get you to leave them alone. Sifiso *was* from Durban.

The suitcase wheels go *frrrrrrrrrrrrr* over the floors, the only sound along with the squeak-squawk-squeak of their sneakers. No announcements, no muzak. It's weird. Mom is on a mission, pushing ahead through the empty halls, and then, to his relief, he recognizes the rising low buzz of noise as voices, human voices, as they follow the signs to Terminal D.

"Pull up your hoodie, okay?" Mom warns. "I don't want to attract attention."

Daniel: And Miles goes on to do… well, he and his mom disguise him as a girl. He becomes valuable – as an uninfected male, one of the rare unaffected males, he becomes an incredibly valuable commodity.

Lauren: Absolutely. And part of what I was trying to do there was kind of turn the "teenage girl in peril" –

Daniel: Oh, interesting.

Lauren: – narrative on its head. So actually, he's the one who's being objectified and sexualized and the government's trying to control his reproductive rights, and kind of everyone's after him, including some very horrible human traffickers.

Daniel: Interesting. So let's move on to some broader questions here about the virus. What's the attraction? What's the allure of writing about a virus, which all of you have done? There's got to be something about that particular element that drew you. Any thoughts on that?

Stephen: Well, everybody gets sick, and so people are interested in sickness and in diseases. And I think there is a certain fascination that I don't think is particularly morbid, because we're all human, and we're all [unintelligible], so the idea that a disease can come along that kills lots of people… I mean, people have been interested in that sort of thing, because it actually happened, since the days of the Black Death. And we see it again, and again, we understand that we're vulnerable, and yet, when something comes along like the coronavirus, we're kind of caught flat-footed by it, and it takes a while to adjust.

Lauren: For me, it was just getting to a world without men as quickly as possible. I would rather aliens, or magic. But you know, having lived in South Africa my entire life and seeing in particular, what HIV/AIDS is, like – just destroyed so many communities, so many lives. We had a health minister who was in rabid denial about it, and prescribing eating garlic and African

potatoes instead of actually dealing with, kind of, the real effects and antiretroviral, which is actually what saves lives. That was kind of a point of interest to me. But yes, it was quite fun designing a virus and talking to geneticists about, like, how this would work. And, again, like it's really trying to play with kind of ideas about gender and the fact that the human papillomavirus, for example, is an STI, which can turn into cervical cancer. So I wanted to kind of flip that as well.

Daniel: The virus in your book has the name, the three-letter name, which, when I read it the first time, I almost misread it as HPV?

Lauren: Yes, exactly.

Daniel: I assume that's by design?

Lauren: Yes, definitely, although I did learn something from a real-world pandemic, which is – my virus is called the Human Culgoa Virus because it originates in Australia in a place called Culgoa. But I've since learned through our experience in the real pandemic that we don't name viruses for places because it leads to all kinds of racism.

Daniel: Right, well, most people don't name viruses for places. Some people violate that –

Lauren: Scientists don't.

Daniel: – Some people in this country violate that otherwise sensible rule, but we'll leave it at that.

Stephen: We may as well say it. Trump calls it the China Virus. And the idea that it belongs to some country or that something happened… I mean, people always look for a reason, don't they? They always want to find a culprit – this thing happened as a result of, I think, Chinese wet markets.

Daniel: I do think that one of the things that's frightening about… well, I'm curious about what you think about what makes a virus frightening. I think one of the things that is frightening like that, at least in corona, is that it seems to have hopped from a nonhuman species to a human species and the human physiology doesn't know how to contend with that. And yet, like we do name things, because look, we call, Emma, in 1918, we call it the Spanish flu.

Emma: For pure propaganda. I mean, I always call it the Great Flu now, because I realize that the countries that were involved in World War I couldn't admit to anything as morale-lowering as high rates of this new flu. So they just blamed Spain for it, because Spain wasn't in the war, so Spain was very honest about the fact that some of its politicians and its King happened to have it, so that bit of propaganda did stick. So I'm delighted that Trump's racist formulations didn't.

But to answer your question, Daniel, about why write a virus story. I think a virus is like one of those blue light tests that, you know, shows you where in a room you touched. It literally traces our social relations and even our relations with, say, animals, and it traces all the things we've been doing since we started clustering in towns and cities and living cheek by jowl with each other. Like, it's – it shows up that kind of invisible web of connections, and it puts a price on

them, you know, it makes them scary. They're precious to us when we're not allowed to touch our grandparents and they're expensive to us if we feel, "Oh my God, I might have caught something in that Starbucks where there's an outbreak this week." So if there wasn't a real virus, a novelist would have had to invent one because it's such an amazing way of taking the most everyday interactions and turning them into narrative gold.

Daniel: Well, it's interesting because I mean, if you think about just the whole… like, obviously, any kind of narratives have to have stakes. And so if you write a novel about war, then obviously, the stakes are high for a lot of people. You write a novel about a virus that could potentially affect everybody, then suddenly, there are stakes to every interaction. And that is at least, to my mind, inherently dramatic, inherently terrifying in a way.

So let's go back to one thing about the 1918 virus here. There's an idea out there that that virus, which – I don't remember the exact number, Emma, how many people are killed – but it's in the millions. I mean, it's a significant effect on the world at the moment.

Stephen: Ask Emma, she'll know.

Emma: You know, it's hard to get historians to agree on this, because, of course, they weren't doing very careful record-keeping; it's a matter of what each city chose to record. I've seen estimates that it killed between 4% and 6% of the world. So obviously, that's a very, very high death rate. In some parts of the world, it was much worse than others, countries in Asia and Africa had it the worst. So I set it in Ireland only because it's my home place, not because that was where they had it the worst. And, of course, another key thing to say about viruses is that even though we talk as if they're going to affect any human being as much as any other, they don't at all, and wealth is protective. So viruses are kind of an X-ray of social inequality. And we've seen that so much this year, haven't we? I mean, we've seen detailed city maps that show up where the poorer people live, where the racialized people live. You know, a virus might at first seem equalizing, but it couldn't be farther from the truth.

Daniel: And let me pick up on that. You have a scene in your book where I think it's – Julia is talking about her having to record the cause of death. Tell us about that.

Emma: That's right. Yes, and Julia's patients are from the inner city and, being Irish women in 1918, they're having way too many babies. So a lot of her women come in to give birth in the hospital already literally drained, you know, the calcium leached from their bones. My mother had eight of us and she used to gently tease me by saying like, oh, you sucked the calcium from my bones, and luckily, she had enough calcium but you know, I'm talking about patients in this book who might come in with their 12th pregnancy. So weak, so underfed, so worn out. One of them comes in with one leg already swollen from the last birth. So, of course, these women have no resources to stand up to something like the virus. So it's as if we all decide collectively who will be weakened by how we apportion our financial resources, and then a virus comes along and we go, "Oh, well, no wonder they died, they had pre-existing conditions."

So exactly the same kind of dynamic in 1918 or, I'm sure, during the great plague of London. I think gout is the only illness I know that the rich have tended to get more. In almost every other case, having money can protect you from some of those social webs that can become fatal.

Laura: I think it was the same thing, right – in your book, Emma – is how much it addresses women in a pandemic and what they're going through. And we're seeing the real effects of that playing out right now where, in previous plagues as well, like during Ebola, like the number of girls who just never went back to school, the number of women who just didn't return to the workforce. And you know, a lot of what we're seeing today is because women are the homemakers and doing the emotional labor and doing, like, the school work and the childcare, even in 2020, and women are just not returning to work at the same rates as men.

Emma: Yes, it's interesting. In those early weeks of COVID, there was a lot said about, "Oh, men seem to be more physiologically vulnerable to it," but then it soon became clear that, yes, an individual man might be more physiologically vulnerable than an individual woman. But if the women are looking after the old people in the care home, and if the women are with the kids, and if the women are doing so much healthcare, you know, that's going to offset it. So I think in fact, that means that quite a lot of the people who get and suffer from COVID have been women because of the kind of risks of their lives. So, yes, you say, Lauren, it's extremely gendered, and a lot of women have been kind of, as it were, knocked off the social ladder – whether being at school or being in the workplace. I've been so grateful that my kids have been teenagers because I know it would be entirely different if they were younger.

Daniel: Yes, and related to that is power, I mean – Stephen King, I feel like *The Stand* is, in some ways, a book about power, as well as about virus. Any thoughts on that? About what viruses tell us about power? Or even what you were trying to say about power in your book.

Stephen: Well, I think that one of the things that I was trying to say was that, in any kind of a crisis situation, a man on horseback always rises to the top. Somebody will come forward and say, "I can deal with this," assuming that they're immune to begin with. Now, the super flu that I wrote about wipes out something like 99.6% of the population, which only leaves just a few people, a few fortunate people. And one of the things that interested me about the flu when I researched it many moons ago was that it's a shifting antigen virus. All right, so that the flu shot you got last year isn't necessarily going to do anything about the flu that you might have going around this year. And in fact, I got the old person's flu shot this year, which is a double strength that covers who knows what. All I know is I roll up my sleeve and I take the shot, but the pharmacist is very clear, saying, this may protect you and it may not protect you.

And one of the things that I think we have to think about when it comes to the coronavirus that we have now – and you talk about people in power. We obviously have a lot of people in power who don't belong in power. Lauren talked about, what did you say, eating garlic? And the President of the United States talked about drinking bleach as a possible cure for the coronavirus. So it's a little bit like, does anybody really understand the depth of this thing? Well, for people who do – Dr. Fauci seems to understand how serious it is, but he's kind of like kryptonite to the people who are in power right now, the people who are controlling this thing – please, God, not much longer. But the thing about the coronavirus is viruses mutate, and it may

be what everybody sort of hopes for is that – not only will it be a vaccine, but the corona will mutate into something that causes the sniffles.

This is a very, very serious disease. President Trump can liken it to the flu but it's not like the flu. This is dangerous, it's a killer and it has long-lasting effects, and it is extremely catching, which is why the people who are working in the hospitals and the ambulances and the first responders are taking tremendous risks. Even the people who work in the supermarkets are taking tremendous risks. You can have those Plexi shields between you and the next person, but the change gets handed back and forth, the credit cards sometimes get handed back and forth if it's not a chip machine. And what happens if the Corona doesn't mutate into something that is not so harmful, but into something that's more harmful, something that's more like the super flu? And you can say, oh, well, Steve King writes those horror books, but somebody has to think about these things and be prepared for these things, and that's where we're not now.

I think that the people in the CDC would tell you that, for years, they have understood that sooner or later, this would happen. MERS, SARS, HIV… Sooner or later, it was going to be something that you could catch, where you couldn't blame this class of people or that class of people. One of the problems that President Trump has had with COVID-19 is that he can't politicize it. Even he got it! Oh, there you are. I didn't talk too much about power because, in this case, the disease is the thing with the power.

Daniel: Interesting, how do you explain that? I mean, think this through as a novelist, what's going through the head of someone like the health minister in South Africa, or our own American president, in this resistance to science? Do you think it's an attempt to deceive? Do you think it is denial? Do you think it is stupidity? I mean, think about those real individuals as characters and get inside their heads and explain to me their motivations and what the hell's going on.

Lauren: So I just have to make a correction, which is, that was our old health minister from the early 2000s. And so, our current health minister has actually been terrific, advised everyone to mask up early, has been really good, and actually, him and his wife just came down with COVID, he announced this morning, and he's been very careful, but he's really been great, and our presidency has been great, apart from the prohibition. So I've actually been really impressed with it. So dissing our old health minister –

Daniel: Sure. I mean, again, looking at it from far, far away, I think that part of his dismissal of it was because HIV/AIDS was so highly sexualized, I think that was part of…

Lauren: It was actually a woman, Manto, and she was part of the Mbeki government, and he was the president at the time. There was a lot of resistance, and there was a lot of American propaganda about how HIV/AIDS was caused by – it was a conspiracy theory that the World Health Organization had unleashed HIV/AIDS upon Africa. So we fell hook, line, and sinker for that, and I'm oversimplifying this and I'm sure that South Africans watching, you're going to scream blue murder – please correct me in the comments.

Daniel: Well, yes, we'll see if we get any questions, Lauren, here on that, but I don't see any angry South Africans yet.

Lauren: Okay, good. They're all asleep. But so – but that level of denial was just absolutely horrific, and killed hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. And they were poor and black, and then some gay men, but it really just devastated this country. And people were dying everywhere. And we got through it, but at a terrible, terrible cost because of this [unintelligible]. And the president at the time, Thabo Mbeki said actually, "Well, HIV/AIDS is a disease of poverty." And he's not wrong, for exactly the same reasons Emma was talking about in that you are more likely to develop full-blown AIDS and die horribly, because you don't have money, because you can't get, like, healthy food to eat because you can't actually look after yourself. You can't just rely on healthy food. You also need the medicine.

One last thing, which I really found out, which is that apparently – and again, scientists please correct me – my understanding is that, if your ancestors had bubonic plague, it uses the same viral receptors as HIV/AIDS. So if your ancestors had the bubonic plague and survived, you are less likely to contract HIV/AIDS.

Daniel: Really?

Lauren: Apparently so. That's what my research turned up, so…

Daniel: Fascinating. So let me pick up on the research point here. Were there works of fiction especially that were meaningful, useful to you as you wrote your own novel about an epidemic or virus?

Emma: For me, it was more – I drew on memoir and diaries, like, Kathleen Lynn is one real character in my book. And I looked at her diaries of keeping a flu clinic up and she tried all these vaccines. And of course, she didn't know what a virus was, nobody did in 1918. So there she was attempting these vaccines based on a bacterial understanding. You know, it's so gallant, sometimes just very brief memoirs. And there was this in a book about the flu in America – there was a volunteer who worked for six days at a hospital and then caught the flu and died. And apparently on her deathbed, she said, "This has been the best week of my life." So it was that kind of fleeting little bit of a historical record that I found most inspiring. The kind of sheer, you know, gallantry and zest and dark humor, and then I would supplement that with things like modern books about medicine and by doctors and midwives, anything sort of to capture the vibe of people desperately trying to keep up that web of healthcare in terrible situations.

Daniel: Steve, or Lauren, did you look to books, like novels, like *The Plague* or *Magic Mountain* or the Boccaccio book about Florence or anything like that as inspiration to help understand a way to tell your story?

Stephen: I remember reading a book when I was very young, probably in junior high school, by George Stewart called *Earth Abides*. And in that story, the main character, the protagonist, was bitten by a rattlesnake and almost died. And whatever was in the bite made him immune to a disease that just covered mankind. And I think it helped that he was stuck in the desert recovering from this bite at the same time. And I was fascinated by a world I hope you never

see, I was fascinated by what the world would look like if the plague of mankind and womankind actually disappeared from the planet and what would happen and how they would recover. One of the characters near the end of *The Stand* says, “What is the best we can hope for,” and the other character says, “A season of rest.” And right now the tired old Earth would really love to have the season of rest. But at the same time, I don’t think anybody wants that to happen at the cost of millions of lives.

And we have to remember – and Emma knows this very, very well – that the coronavirus today is nothing. It’s not a patch on the flu pandemic of 1918. That was much worse and it killed a lot more people. Although… Emma mentions in there one thing that I absolutely loved because I’ve seen the pictures on the net since then – women standing shoulder-to-shoulder wearing masks, saying, “Wear a mask or go to jail.” And that’s what we need right now. Wear a mask or go to jail.

Daniel: Well, there are… I mean – masks, as you mentioned, Stephen – masks make an appearance in Emma’s books and some lovely descriptions of them. That reminds me, I was thinking about it even today when I was out, and there are people here in the mean streets of Washington, DC wearing those masks that sort of are almost duck-like, and forgive me Emma, but there’s something in your novel about those kinds of bird-like masks.

Emma: People wore them very inconsistently in the British Isle. They were a bigger deal in America. And in Britain, I think it was sporadic, and people didn’t quite know how to wear them anywhere in the world. There was this period that you should wear the mask while you were out walking on the street. And then when you got to the pub or the cinema or your home, you take it off as if it was an overcoat, so I’m not sure how effective they were then but, you know, it was worth a try. And yes, even back then you can see that tension between the kind of crazed libertarian anti-mask leagues, and then people saying, “It seems at least hopeful, let’s try it.”

Daniel: And you see some earnest public messaging and, forgive me again on this, keeping three books in my head is not my forte, but there’s a slogan that people use about stir—with the word stir in it.

Emma: Maybe it’s, “If in doubt, don’t stir out.”

Daniel: Yes.

Emma: I made up all those bits of government propaganda but they were all inspired by real posters. In America, they had quite a few rhyming posters, for instance, like “Coughs and sneezes spread diseases.” You know, I think these governments were all a little bit paternalistic, they were like, “Ooh, if we make it rhyming, the poor ignorant plebs may be able to remember the slogan.”

Stephen: On turnpike boards, you know, the LED boards, “Coughs and sneezes spread diseases,” it’s everything old is new again.

Daniel: It’s like that poem; “I had a little bird, its name was Enza, I opened the window and in flew Enza.”

So for all the folks watching, we have some questions piling up. For people watching, go to the Q&A function on Zoom. And I'm going to turn to the Q&A from the audience here, you guys, if that's all right, and what we have is that people are able to submit questions, and then vote on which ones that they like so, we have the wisdom of crowds or at least a preference of crowds here.

And number one at the top is from Karen Anderson, I don't know where Karen's from. It's not a question, I'm going to read it directly, "Please tell Mr. King, thank you for standing up to President Trump." So Mr. King, thank you for standing up to President Trump. Oh, Karen's from Washington, DC, she is probably my neighbor.

So that's one, another interesting question – oh, here we go, now everybody's chiming in here – from Mike A, says, "After living through the last six to eight months, is there anything any of the writers would change about the book they wrote?"

Lauren: I definitely would. I hadn't considered how… You know, my heroine is isolated, and that's probably why I made her a South African is that she doesn't have friends and family to turn to. And that's why she's so desperate to get out of America. But I hadn't realized just how dehumanizing and lonely it would be not to be able to see your friends, to hug your family. I don't know when I'm going to be able to fly to Joburg to see my mom again, and that has been really devastating, so that's definitely something I would change.

Daniel: What about Steve or Emma?

Stephen: Oh, I think probably one of the things that is missing from *The Stand,* except when they're disposing of bodies, are masks. Because I think the masks would be a first step and that if I had that book to do over again, I would have a lot of people wearing masks. And what Lauren just said – the isolation, the way people are faced with living and sometimes dying alone.

Daniel: Yes. Emma?

Emma: I wouldn't change anything, not because it is perfect, but just because it's 1918. I think I tried to make it as true to 1918 as I could, and our circumstances are so different now. We have these tantalizing pleasures, like Zooming with authors you idolize, so near and yet so far so. I would look back and say, "Did I meet Stephen King, or no? Maybe that was a Zoom thing in the year 2020," you know. So, yes, back then, I guess they probably read more books and had less Netflix.

Daniel: I think one of the things that is interesting, and I'm going to encourage the folks watching this to read all these books, but there's something kind of powerful reading them together when it comes to loneliness because if you look at *The Stand*, the setting is vast. I mean, it's essentially the whole country and you have Las Vegas and Boulder and basically, the whole American landscape, and then Lauren's book is a race to get out and people are covering, you know, the two main characters are covering a lot of territories. Meanwhile, Emma's is kind of like *Room*, I guess – big insight there. It's very confined.

Stephen: Wouldn't it make a great play?

Daniel: It's a great point, actually. I hadn't thought about that. It's fascinating. I mean, for those of you who haven't read it, it's because it takes place over a small amount of time and in a single place, yes. Also, I mean, again, I'm going to get to the audience question here, but Emma, what is with not using quotation marks?

Emma: You know, I usually use quotation marks, but for this one, I wanted to try the style of no quotes dialogue that – and some writers I love like Roddy Doyle, Cormac McCarthy, and [unintelligible]. And what it does is it makes the reader work just slightly harder, to see a distinction between spoken words and thoughts. And I wanted the whole book – this nurse midwife is having such a grueling three days – and [I] wanted the whole thing to have that slightly trippy feel of like, words blow by and you're not quite sure of the distinction between the spoken ones and the thought ones.

Daniel: Yeah, it connects to Steve's point about a play, you feel like you're sort of in the room with all these characters. It's so fascinating. Okay, so let's go to… We're going on more audience questions here. We've got Ellen, Ellen wants to know… okay, it's for all of you, I sort of asked this a little bit, but, "Are there historic pandemic fiction books you recommend or were inspired by?"

Lauren: Oh, God, I can't remember the author's name, it is about cholera, the first outbreak of cholera in the UK, and tracing it back and how they developed germ theory. I'm going to have to Google it, I'm going to Google it while you guys are answering your question.

Daniel: This is one of the great things about being on Zoom is that the world doesn't know that you are Googling. Any recommendations from King or Donoghue?

Emma: *Station 11,* by Emily St. John Mandel, that's a very good one. It's very subtle, because it's not like the internet is just snuffed out. It's more like people go and queue up near towers to get just a little bit of Wi-Fi. So the idea that our civilization, that there would be – just kind of drags a bit left that we'd be competing for that kind of wistfulness. I found that incredibly realistic, it's not all or nothing, it's that we probably will have the remnants, you know.

Lauren: I have found it, it's *The Ghost Map* by Steven Johnson.

Daniel: Oh, terrific, right, yes that's a nonfiction book by Steve. That's fascinating about… Yeah, great book, I love it.

Stephen: The *Hot Zone* by Richard Preston. And the one that I think that… It's hard for me to tell whether or not people want to read about mass outbreaks of disease and at a time like this or whether they don't, but the one that stands out, in my mind is called *The End of October* by Lawrence Wright. And the amazing thing about this book is that he wrote it before the virus and he hit every note just about from beginning to end, including the political inability of people to look this in the face and say, we're going to take the necessary steps. But the thing about that book that will haunt me, there are lines that you will remember in fiction, you know, in *1984*, "all the clocks were striking 13," things like that, that we remember. And the last line, and I'm not

going to spoil the book, but the last line of the Lawrence Wright book, *The End of October*, is "We did this to ourselves." Where disease comes from is a question of what you do about it once it's there.

Daniel: Yes, I think what's interesting about that book, again, the timing of it, it's sort of like Emma's book, it's like extraordinary that that book came out, I think – when did that come out Steve? Like, February of this year or something like that. I mean, because he's a journalist and a documentary filmmaker, and so that's a very journalistic account. I'm interested that you're not going back further in time.

Lauren: Well *Love in the Time of Cholera* – a time of cholera, although I think that's more about kind of normal life… well, like Emma's book, I suppose, like pandemics kind of a backdrop to the real action… And more recently, I really like Chuck Wendig's *Wanderers*. And he's just a terrific writer, and really great news, just super fun, and also very chilling with all these right-wing militias kind of forming.

Emma: I can't speak for the rest of you, but I'm always a bit nervous of reading books that are too similar to the one I'm working on.

Daniel: Interesting.

Emma: I might read it before I begin, but once I'm in it the last thing I want is to suddenly be too influenced by Camus's *The Plague* for instance, whereas nonfiction feels like it's a nourishing source for fiction, but other people's fiction is dangerous. You might find it so good, you don't need to write your own book for instance.

Daniel: Yes, that's a fascinating point. I'll throw one into the mix even though it's not purely about a virus or pandemic, I thought it was one of the better novels I have read in the last several years… present company excluded, of course… is *The Great Believers* by Rebecca Makkai, about the very early days of the AIDS epidemic. And it's not so much about the virus itself or the illness itself, it's about how it cascades into people's social worlds.

But enough about me, let's talk about other questions from people. We've got Heather. Heather wants to know what is happening now, that you could not… well I'm going to skip that one because I think we've answered that one. Okay, here we go, sorry about that, Heather. We've got another Karen here, "Will any of you be writing about this pandemic, in any form or fashion?"

Lauren: I think everybody is going to be writing about this pandemic because this is like a massive moment in history for us. And so I think there's no way to avoid it, like every novel going forward, I mean, how do you write a novel set a year from now, two years from now without imagining, okay, well, will people be wearing masks? How many more people will have died? What will be happening? It's impossible not to imagine a reality where – or fiction where our current reality doesn't play a major part.

Stephen: Yes, I talked at the beginning about a book that I was working on when the thing broke out, and there were minor characters in there that I had to move off the scene at some point. And so, I sent them all flus, and the book was set in 2020, and I thought, well, that can't

happen. That's ridiculous, it cannot happen. So my solution was to move everything back to 2019. But it's what Lauren just said, that's a quick fix, the same way that the TV shows that you see now, nobody's wearing masks, everybody is kissy-kissy, huggy-huggy, that's going to have to change, and it's a huge challenge for the novelist.

Daniel: Emma, any thoughts on that?

Emma: I can't say yet, because I've got something set this year, but you know it could turn out to be embarrassingly bad, so, let's just not speak about it till it's over.

Daniel: We also have a question, so, while I'm on you, we have a question somewhere in this queue, which is filling up rapidly here, and really taxing my abilities to multitask, is, "What's your musical about?"

Emma: Again, I can't say, because…

Daniel: Oh, you won't say, okay. Yes, it's interesting, though, the way that you are responding to that question, in a way, you're saying that the novels will have to reckon with this as the backdrop of our lives.

Emma: Or else, you could deliberately write a novel that doesn't refer to it. You could have your, say, a couple in the countryside that just [don't] refer to the outside world, which is how Boccaccio does it. I believe his *Decameron* is very much like, let's tell stories, and not talk about the plague. So, yes, whether we pointedly leave it out, or we set everything in 2019, or whether we set everything 10 years on and hope that there are no masks anymore, either way, there'll be a fault line infection.

Daniel: Yes, this is hard to foresee, but do you see, sort of like COVID novels, that is, in the same way we think about oh, that's a Vietnam, *The Things They Carried,* that's a Vietnam War novel, or World War II novels. Or do you think we will see a whole collection of plague novels or COVID novels that are explicitly about COVID-19?

Emma: Yes, I think they'll all come out in about another nine months. And even a novel set in a part of the world that maybe it didn't touch as much as any other, you'll still see the ripples. Yes, it'll be very interesting to see how writers cope with this because we don't all want to write the same thing, we don't all want to be complaining about how glitchy Zoom was, we want our own territory. And this is an experience that everyone is having to a certain extent, so, we have this kind of dread of not being original.

Daniel: I'm waiting for a sort of Edward Albee style, "What's the Matter with Virginia Woolf" play, but it's about two families that have formed a family pod together. Free idea for anybody out there, let's keep moving on.

A question for Mr. King from Jennifer. Jennifer says, "I have taught *The Stand* in many college-level English classes and my students have often asked: why the center of all the goodness" – this is a great question – "why the center of all the goodness in the novel" – which is Mother Abigail, who's a centenarian – "why all the goodness in the novel Mother Abigail is

from Nebraska? As a native Nebraskan myself, I must admit that I too am curious. So, why Nebraska?"

Stephen: Because I love it. I love Nebraska, I love the middle of the country, it's big, and it feels like home to me, because I'm a country kid, I grew up in the country. And some writer – and it might have been Cormac McCarthy – he said, "The thing about the Midwest is reality is thinner there." So, it seemed like a good place, and as far as the people settling in Boulder, I was living there when I wrote the book, so.

Daniel: All right, so you can answer that question for your students. Amanda wants to know, "Are there lessons that you hope" – sorry, every time I start reading a question it moves on me – "Are there lessons that you hope people will take away from your novels in coping with the COVID 19 pandemic?" And then she says, this is a great question, "How can fiction help us process this moment?"

Lauren: So, in my novel, there is an anarchist community who are… and you know, I have to emphasize that the novel is really post pandemic, it's three years later. But there's an anarchist community that is trying to kind of overthrow capitalism and provide housing for all and get rid of national debts. And I think they're having sparks of hope through the pandemic that we're living through right now. And in Cape Town and Johannesburg, in particular, we've seen a lot of community action networks, specifically pairing up between the very wealthy suburbs and the desperately poor suburbs. But meeting as equals as opposed to kind of charity handouts and working with community leaders to figure out what to do, and a lot of that is woman-led.

And that's been really, really interesting to see, and I hope that we can take some really good lessons from this. As Emma was talking about earlier, so much of this comes down to inequality and poverty. And it'd be really great if we can come out of this with universal basic income and free healthcare for all and, you know, some really good lessons as well.

Stephen: Well said.

Emma: The nurse in my novel has a watch and she makes a little scratch on it every time she loses a patient. She can't bear the idea that these nobodies from the slums and stillborn babies who will be never spoken up again, you know that nobody will record that they died, so she makes a little scratch. And I think a lot of people this year have been devastated at not having the traditional ways like funerals to grieve their dead. I mean, I'm so glad that I lost my mother in 2018 – big Irish funeral, all her walking club there, all my family around me – you know, that was a better way to mark somebody's death. You know these long-distance or Zoom-style funerals, it's brutal. So, I suppose my novel in a way is about taking those moments to respect and to mourn all the ones we're losing, you know.

Daniel: Another question, it's from Gwydion, this is a little bit American focused, so forgive us for that. "Living through a pandemic seems to have brought a deep American conflict into focus. Some of us want to be free to make our own individual decisions about, say, mask-wearing and social distancing, but the virus reminds us of the fact that we are, like it or not, a collective of human beings." We are one and we only beat the virus if we fight it this way. We're also one

planet. So, his question is, with that dilemma in the background, this dilemma about sort of fundamental American conflicts or, it's fundamental human conflicts being surfaced here, "how can literature help us find common ground and restore that sense of collective belonging? Can books bring us together at this critical moment?"

Stephen: Probably not. Probably not. I think everybody has a tendency to read things that sort of reinforce where they're coming from. And the thing about the masks and politicizing the mask, you can correct me if I've got the wrong attribution, I thought it was Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said, "Freedom of speech doesn't extend to yelling fire in a crowded theatre." And it seems to me that the whole idea of personal choice and freedom here in this country or in England, or in South Africa, or wherever, it doesn't include the ability to not wear a mask. Because it's not just you, it's a question of, are you infecting others?

Emma: It's a paradox, isn't it? Because the novel as a form, you could say, has an individualism built-in, you know, baked into it, in that it's all about the one interesting person or even if you've got 100 characters, it's those particular hundred, it's not people in general. But yet, a novel is also a really good technology of empathy, I have ended up caring deeply about people who I wouldn't have before because I wouldn't get close enough to them in real life. So, potentially a novel does make you see those webs of human connection and think about the effect of your behavior on others. And as we've been saying, an illness like this makes a mockery of the idea of the individual rights where we're all living in this biosphere together and literally breathing in each other's faces. So the idea that I have some personal right to choose whether to wear a mask or not is just so scientifically naive.

Stephen: Daniel, I think that Lauren would like to answer Audrey's question.

Daniel: Oh, go ahead, yes. Thanks, Steve. Let me see if I can find Audrey's question here.

Lauren: So, Audrey was asking why…

Daniel: Go for it, just read Audrey's question and answer it.

Lauren: So, why did you… I can't read it properly. It's about why I decided to kill trans women as if they were cis men and how painful that was. So, obviously, this is… well, maybe not obviously, but trans rights are very important to me, and my feminism aims to be intersectional. I had a blind spot in the book, and I didn't actually realize that it would be so hurtful. I had some trans activists and trans people reach out to me, some people very angry and very in pain, after the book was published, and I went back to try and understand where my blind spots were, and specifically I hired two sensitivity readers, a trans man and a trans woman, to go back through the manuscript and show me, help me understand, and I also spoke to an amazing trans doctor in Cape Town who is herself a trans woman and deals with a lot of gender affirmation surgeries.

So, I've certainly learned a lot from that. Women do have prostates, women can die from prostate cancer, and also, if you're a trans woman, I learned, and you are on hormone replacement therapy, you have a much, much lower risk of dying of prostate cancer. So, that's been a lot of stuff that I've learned along the way. And I'm very sorry for any pain that I have caused the trans community.

Daniel: Okay, thanks for that question, Audrey. So, we have a question from Patty, for Emma, we've covered this a little bit. She wants to know: "I was struck by the signs from the government with slogans and directions about what to do to prevent illness. Was that language taken from real signs that were posted at the time?" I guess, did you harvest those at all?

Emma: It's not a direct quotation, but in all my reading, I remember jotting down stuff about what government posters said, in Brazil and Argentina, in many countries in the world, and those famous American posters too. And what I was trying to capture wasn't the details of local policy. But the kind of weird tonal shifts the way governments would try and scare you into doing sensible things like staying home, and then the next minute, they'd be saying, but we have the situation well in hand, you know because I realized this year politicians always have mixed motives, even if they're good people. They're trying to help the economy, and they're trying to make sure people will vote for them, they're trying to quell panic, they have all sorts of motivations, which are not the same as those of the scientists. And basically, I've come out of this year trusting the scientists a lot more. But yes, in those posters, I really tried to find the kind of dark humor in the fact that governments [can't] really afford to simply tell you the truth. They're always somehow massaging the facts and spinning the situation.

Daniel: Interesting. Interesting question here from Nandini, who I happen to know – just full disclosure, she's a public health professional, and she's from here in Washington, DC. "As fiction writers, how would you craft the end of the COVID-19 story?" And she says, "maybe literature can give public health some ideas."

Emma: Oh, yes, I would have it as a youth movement. You know, basically, the kids on TikTok would just make it so universally cool to wear masks all the time and would soon become just more and more fuddy-duddy and pathetic and socially, it would make you a pariah if you weren't following the rules. So, yes, it would be wonderful to have it as a sort of upswelling of youth culture.

Daniel: TikTok army takes over and resolves the issue. Lauren or Stephen, any thoughts on how you would end this story?

Lauren: Well, I want a lot of high fashion masks, so it becomes a kind of standard and just, like, really beautiful, although you know, I also have friends who are hard of hearing, who really struggle because suddenly they can't read lips as well. So I think we also have to be careful of not being too ableist, I guess, as well, and I don't know how to figure that out. But ideally, Americans get a new president, the new president sorts everything out, we actually listen to our scientists and take the time to develop a vaccine. In the meantime, we actually mask up and we social distance, we're responsible and we don't go partying, and yes. But that seems to be asking a lot.

Daniel: Stephen King, how would you write this next chapter?

Stephen: Well, the thing is, I would have to think about it some more because what Lauren said is true. And of course, masks have already started to become fashion accessories. We own corgis here and so I have corgi face masks, including one that has two rolls of toilet paper

between the corgis, it just sort of covers everything. But what Lauren is saying doesn't have that novelistic bang at the end of it that you want to look for. I mean…

Lauren: It needs more murder hornets.

Stephen: That's it, we need more murder hornets. Man, I don't know, the best ending that I can think of offhand that even comes close to what we're talking about, and not very close, is the end of *The War of the Worlds* when the Martians are all killed by microbes because they're not used to Earth microbes, so they all just sort of dribble out of their death machines. But it would have to be something like that. But what we're looking at probably is just a gradual winding down. It might get quite a bit better, but the thing about the climax is that this has to be with us for quite a while. I mean, there's going to be a vaccine, which a lot of people won't take because of the conspiracy theories about how it's going to make you grow a third eye, you'll be injecting a deep state space box into your bloodstream and they will be watching you, so... I'm not sure. Right now I just see a gradual winding down and that's just not a novel.

Daniel: No, no.

Emma: I saw a great thing, I think it was on Twitter, where some wonderful words had talked about – what if you know everything which keeps going wrong with 2020 is actually time travelers who are desperately trying to fix things, but every time they try they make it worse? And I quite like that novelist's idea, and I hope they succeed in the end.

Daniel: That's good. I kind of like the TikTok army coming to the rescue. It's cinematic if nothing else. Other questions – we're going to try to cram in a few more here, guys, before we wrap up here. This is from Cindy, she says, "It's for Stephen King, but all can answer. What is your favorite character that you brought into existence?" Or is there a particular character that you've created that you like talking about, that you're glad you brought into the world?

Stephen: Well, since we're talking about plagues, I like Mother Abigail from *The Stand*.

Daniel: What do you like about her? She's almost like a godlike figure.

Stephen: Yes, she's old, and she's wise, but at the same time, she's down to earth. And she says something like, she's getting ready to get all these people to come to her house, and she strings up a pig, and she says, "Dear God, thank you for this meat, and please don't let me screw this up." So, it's like the divine and the profane at the same time.

Daniel: Oh, nice.

Stephen: And she was from Nebraska. So of course, I liked her.

Daniel: Emma or Lauren, any favorite characters that you brought to life?

Lauren: I think my favorite character is Zinzi December from my novel *Zoo City*, which won the Arthur C Clarke award. It's probably my weirdest book and very difficult to explain. It's about a woman with a sloth on her back who has the magical ability to find lost things, and she also writes email scams and is tasked with finding a missing pop star. But she's trying really hard,

she's dealing with a lot of kind of grief and trauma. And one of the things I was trying to do with that book was looking at how we get over not only the things which have been done to us, whether that's personal or systemic, but also how we recuperate and recover and be better from the things that we've done. Also, she has a sloth.

Daniel: You had me at sloth on their back.

Lauren: I know, right?

Daniel Pink: Emma?

Emma: I almost find this question hard to answer, because I feel I'm going to hurt the feelings of all my other children, you know?

Daniel: That's what I would think, yes.

Emma: I guess in the most recent book, I like Bridey, because she's an absolute nobody, she's a volunteer.

Daniel: I like her.

Emma: The nuns send her in to volunteer in this ward, and she's the only character I've ever written based on a state inquiry – the Irish state did an inquiry into its terrible residential institutions and all the appalling things that were done to kids there. So, I decided that Bridey would be like the one somehow untouched thing that came through that awful system, that she would have just these natural reserves of kind of curiosity and energy and human warmth, despite never having been treated well by anybody. So she was me asking a question of whether you just might be able to triumph over a terrible upbringing. So, I really enjoyed writing her from those very dry and dark sources.

Daniel: Okay, we got a few more… we have lots of questions coming in here, this one from Miranda, "What is your favorite thing about the writing process, and what was it like writing and publishing your first novel?" So, you have three very accomplished novelists, go back in time, what was it like doing the very first one?

Emma: I tried to have mine recalled. The publishers bought my first two together, Penguin did, and I called them up after about six months, and I said, "Can we scrap the first one, *Stir Fry*, to start with the second? It's a much better book." And my editor said, "Yes, it's a much better book, but most people will prefer your first one, it's just more kind of cheerful and likable." So, she said, "Trust me on this, let me go ahead." And she was dead right, the first one sold better than the second even though the second was better. So, at a certain point, you have to just let them go out into the world.

Lauren: I think it just came easier to me, I was more hungry, I hadn't got all the pressure of having awards and having to live up to the previous book. So I struggle with that a bit. I'm the opposite of an introverted writer, I actually need other people around me. So, normally, I work from a studio and it's been very devastating to have to sit at home and write alone. But yes, it was more fun, it came more easily, it felt like play, it felt really experimental, and, of course,

there was the fear of failure and the fear of success. But I feel like it just loads on the more books you write. Maybe Stephen can tell us how to get over that.

Daniel: Yes, Steve, so, if you can go back in time, your very first book, tell us what that was like, and then maybe answer Lauren's question about how do you get over any of the hurdles, inevitable hurdles that come from the subsequent ones?

Stephen: It depends on whether or not you mean my first published book or my first book because I was… I guess that I finished a novel by the time that I was 18. It was later published under a pseudonym, Richard Bachman, it was called at that time *Getting It On* and it was later published as *Rage.* And it was a school shooter novel that I pulled off. I won't let it be sold anymore, I guess there's black market and copies on eBay and places like that. But with *Carrie,* there were no second novel jitters, I had written about half of it, and I threw it away, and my wife says, "What's this in the wastebasket," and she picked it out and, and she read it with this very Tabitha smile on her face. And I said, "This was going to be a short story, and it's all about young women, and I don't really know what to do," and she said," I will help you." And she did, and the book got done.

And it was sitting in a little pile of manuscripts, single spaced because in those days, I had to save all the paper that I could. So I had it on the side of the desk, and I was writing another book at the time that *Carrie* sold, it was called *Salem's Lot*. So there weren't any of the second novel jitters because I had something on the go. It was fun, it's always been fun.

Daniel: Yes, well, I think one of the things that – I think we have a lot of aspiring writers on here – I think one of the things that I'm taking away from you folks is just the lesson of sit down and do the work.

Stephen: And how do you feel about that?

Daniel: Sitting down and doing the work?

Stephen: Yeah.

Daniel: I resist it every day, but I show up. I mean, my view as a writer is that I have a very blue-collar approach to it, I think of it like being a bricklayer, and my job is to go to the office, go to the worksite, which is here where I'm sitting right now, and do my job. Lay a few bricks, come back the next day, fix the wobbly ones, lay a few more bricks, fix it, you know? And you show up whether you feel like showing up because you have a job to do. And that's my view on that. I don't want to have the last word here, so let's go around the horn very quickly before we wrap up. Any last thought you all want to leave us with about anything from the role of literature or how to get through a trying time like this, or a great recipe, anything?

Lauren: Well, I would highly recommend mental health you know, however, you can manage that. If you can afford a psychologist, that's great. But also just, I know it's boring and overused, but be kind to yourself. We're living through a very traumatic and weird and lonely existential, crazy time. So, you don't have to pile everything on at once. Just be gentle.

Daniel: Great advice from Lauren. Here's her book, get a copy. We go to Emma.

Emma: I find it very comforting to read about appalling moments in our history because, you know? And it does make the horrors of the present day, it puts them in perspective. So, yes, I've totally enjoyed, say, Hilary Mantel's trilogy about Thomas Cromwell because compared to the tensions of Tudor London in Henry's court, this day feels a bit liveable by comparison.

Daniel: That's Emma Donoghue from London, Ontario. Here's her book, get this one too folks. Finally, Steve, we'll give you the last word.

Stephen: I will just say that there's a big difference between the super flu in *The Stand* and the coronavirus. With the super flu, either you're dead or you're alive. You're one of the fortunate few who's alive, and people need to remember that coronavirus is a virus. It doesn't care about your political party and it doesn't care what bumper sticker you have on your truck. It doesn't care whether you think you're a manly man or whether you need to go to your job. But there are things you can do – you can wear a mask, you can socially distance, you can take reasonable precautions. And if you do those things, the chances are very, very good that this will all be in the rearview mirror.

Daniel: Great advice from Stephen King, author of *The Stand*. This edition is the unabridged, the uncut version of it, which is quite remarkable. You understand, reading this book, what a page… but you also understand what it means to have to be a page turner because there's a lot of pages to turn here and that terrific, compelling, somewhat terrifying book.

So, let's say one final word of thanks to the folks at PEN/Faulkner, thanks to all of you for joining us from around – literally hundreds of people from around the world – and let's bring on Gwydion Suilebhan, who is PEN/Faulkner's Executive Director. Here's Gwydion. Hey, Gwydion!

Gwydion Suilebhan: Yes, well, I just want to start by offering my immense thanks for Steve, Lauren, Emma, Daniel, you, and of course, Bethanne, and all of you for making this another incredible Literary Conversation, we really couldn't do anything we do without your participation. I wanted to close tonight by dropping our donation link back into the chat window.

[Donate to PEN/Faulkner using this link! bit.ly/penfaulkner]

And despite what the esteemed Mr. King told us tonight, I happen to believe that at a time when there's so much that's keeping us all separated, or even divided from one another, from viruses to politics to culture wars, books can still bring us together. Books have the power to close the distances between one culture and another, one person and another. The right story can make you feel seen and heard and understood, and that's critical.

And that's why we at PEN/Faulkner work so hard to put culturally relevant books into the hands of DC students who don't always have enough access to stories even in good times. And in times like these, recent events have made that even more critical and difficult. So, even $15 from you can totally transform one young person's reading life with one book, and $15 a month, if you can manage that, can help us do that all year long. So thank you so much for anything

you can do, even if it’s a small, small contribution. And truthfully, thank you for joining us tonight and helping complete the circle of this conversation. We’re very grateful to have you all.