Literary Conversations: Crisis

April 19, 2021

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

If you're able to, please consider donating to PEN/Faulkner.

You can also purchase T.C. Boyle's *Talk to Me*, Jenny Offill's *Weather*, and Nnedi Okorafor's *Remote Control* from Politics & Prose.

Bethanne Patrick: Hello, everyone. Welcome to PEN/Faulkner's last Literary Conversation of the Spring 2021 season, Crisis. My name is Bethanne Patrick, and I'm the Programs Committee Chair. I'm so excited to have you all here tonight. We have such a stellar group of authors who are going to be interviewed by an equally stellar moderator.

For those of you who are joining us for the first time for a PEN/Faulkner event, what you should know about us is that we're a nonprofit literary organization based in Washington, DC. We have a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between communities and writers to enrich individuals, groups, communities, schools – you name it, we're doing it.

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 include buying free books for, and facilitating author visits to, DC public and charter schools, and our Literary Conversation series, which you're watching right now. The new season of that in the fall will include some great events too, so please watch our website, sign up for our updates and join us again, because even if we're not in person, we will have virtual events, hybrid forms events that you can participate.

A couple of notes about our webinar this evening – there will be a short Q&A at the end of the event, so please submit your questions while the event is going on via the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. You can also upvote your favorite questions, and you can comment on questions as well. We'll do our best to get to as many as possible. Usually, we have about 15 minutes at the end for questions, yours may not get answered, but please know we're doing our best to get the questions to the authors that you want to speak with.

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

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Thanks so much for listening to my spiel and now, let's get down to this evening's programming. We have three amazing author panelists and then, as I said, also an amazing moderator.

Let me introduce T.C. Boyle – an American novelist and short story writer who has written 17 novels and 12 collections of short stories. He won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1988 for his third novel *World's End*, and the Prix Médicis in France for *The Tortilla Curtain* in 1995.

A distinguished professor of English Emeritus at the University of Southern California, T.C. lives in Santa Barbara. His next novel *Talk to Me* will come out in September 2021 from Ecco. Welcome T.C., thanks for being here.

T.C. Boyle: My pleasure. I wish we were there in person but –

Bethanne: I do, too. Our next panelist is Jenny Offill, the author of the novels, *Last Things*, a *New York Times* notable Book of the Year and a finalist for the *LA Times* Book Award, and *Dept. of Speculation*, which was shortlisted for the Folio Prize, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the International Dublin Award. Jenny lives in upstate New York and teaches at Syracuse University and in the low-residency program at Queen's University. Jenny, thanks so much for being here this evening with us.

Jenny Offill: Thanks for having me.

Bethanne: It's great. Last but far from least in our author lineup, Nnedi Okorafor who is an international award-winning writer of science fiction and fantasy for both children and adults. I want to point out that the specific terms for her works are Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism. Her many works include *Who Fears Death*. That's in development at HBO as a TV series, really exciting. *Binti*, it's a trilogy in development at Hulu as a TV series. Oh my gosh. The *Akata* series and her most recent novella, which is *Remote Control.*

Nnedi is currently adapting Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* for TV with Amazon Studios. She lives with her daughter Anyaugo in Phoenix, Arizona. And moderating and interlocuting for everyone – and Nnedi, welcome, thank you for being here –

Nnedi Okorafor: Happy to be here.

Bethanne: – is Sean Murphy, who is a longtime columnist for Pop Matters, who has work that's appeared in *Salon, The Village Voice,* the Washington City Paper, The Good Men Project, and many others. Sean's chapbook *The Blackened Blues* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. He has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and served as Writer in Residence at the New Epicenter in Martha's Vineyard. He's the Founding Director of 1455 Literary Arts, which is based in Winchester, Virginia, but reaches a big audience in this virtual world. Sean, thank you also for being with us.

Sean Murphy: Absolutely. My pleasure, Bethanne, thanks for having me.

Bethanne: Thank you all. I'm going to let Sean take it away now. I know you're in excellent hands and again, thank you all for joining us this evening. Let's talk about the crisis.

Sean: Okay, well thanks again, Bethanne. It's absolutely – and also thank you to the entire team at PEN/Faulkner for the amazing work you do, and putting events like this together. I think we all would agree that as we continue to be in this kind of virtual reality world, hopefully not too much longer, the show does have to go on. The work that PEN/Faulkner does to make sure we can connect, is really meaningful.

Everyone that's out there paying attention tonight, thanks for joining us.

It's an extraordinary honor for me to have an opportunity to speak to three incredible authors. I've been immersing myself in their recent work and it's been an absolute joy. My only concern

heading into this event has been with a topic that's a little bit heady, how are we possibly going to do justice and fit it all in, in the time that we have. We'll do our best and I'll do my best to stay out of the way and shine the light on the authors.

If I were asked to try to encapsulate an intersection of culture and creativity that the notion of crisis evokes, I would suggest, or I would submit that I'm old school enough to remember that the paradigm for a disaster done creatively, artistically throughout the 20th, and even into the 21st century, was this notion of humankind having to react to some calamity. It's a tailor-made set up for a superhero or a Superman or woman to come in and save the day and then everyone rides off happily into the sunset.

I think the work we're talking about tonight is a reflection of our current political, and just world, reality, which is, we have let circumstances get to a point through inaction, in the real world where now it's this existential crisis that exists all the time. I appreciate the way that the three most recent works of yours all grapple with this notion that there's this urgency now, but on the other hand, there's almost a radicalized ignorance in our culture now. It behooves us to always remember that this doesn't exist in a vacuum. There's big money involved in ensuring that people are as apathetic as possible, as checked out as possible.

I think the best way to summarize this is a quote from T.C. that was used for this event where he says, and I think it's a great tone setter for this discussion tonight. He's written, "Again, to be an environmentalist is to face the reality that nobody else wants to face. At a certain point a lecture turns you off, but it can get inside you by art and it can make a big difference."

I'd love to kick it off and have each of you maybe say a few words about this notion of getting the message inside through the art, which can combine your creative approach or your own personal sense of urgency as it relates to crisis and how you've explored that in your work. Maybe T.C., if you want to start since I quoted you, you can be the first–

T.C.: My pleasure, Sean. Thank you so much. It's so hard to do what the three of us do in trying to find a way to talk about what's happening in the world. We're all going to die. We tend to forget that every day, just in order to get through life. Also, the same thing is happening with the environmental crisis. Even those of us who are keenly attuned to it and making art in order to move people about it. Nonetheless, we tend to try to hope that it's not really happening and yet how frightening it is.

I wrote *A Friend of the Earth* in the year 2000, and as a wise guy projected to 2026, when all of the shit hits the fan, wow, it's already here. I'm now trying to write about 25 years from now, and it is so incredibly depressing. Which is why I'm making it a comedy, of course, as Jenny does.

Jenny: I think that the reason I started writing about the climate crisis was I felt like I was reading a lot of apocalyptic novels, but I knew that my own experience was not as epic. That it was actually a very dark and lonely experience of finally really sitting down with the science and basically just the phrase – faster than expected, faster than expected – which just comes up again, and again. I guess it felt like a very–

At first, I really wasn't sure that writing a weirdo experimental novel about climate change was the best approach, but I also feel like there's something about fiction and about art that allows people to feel less alone as they look at something, because they're involving themselves in a world and there's a narrator that they can have as a companion.

For me, it was thinking about my own way of looking at things only out of the corner of my eye in terms of the environmental crisis and trying to show a character that was also like that who became really increasingly aware and radicalized as the book went on.

Nnedi: I guess for me, it's weird because I grew up reading a lot of post-apocalyptic narratives and just a lot of them, I was obsessed with them. I was obsessed with just thinking about what happens before? What leads up to it? What happens when it happens, and what happens afterwards? I was obsessed with that, but even so I think that the way that I ended up writing so much about climate change, even when I'm writing these science fictional narratives and these fantastical narratives is that it's always there. The stories that I'm writing are like, I'd like to really get close to character.

Here, it always starts with characters for me. I like to get as close to those characters as possible. I like to be on the ground with them and you can't have, or I can't write, a narrative where those aren't – those issues are not part of the story. I just can't. They are part of our world. It was like, even though I didn't go in meaning for the story to be about issues of the environment, my stories were always about the environment because the characters were living in them. That's always something that I'm chewing on and just that I'm living within.

The idea of the characters learning to live with and within the crisis has been something that – I think it's also a coping mechanism for me, knowing that things are going to go wrong. I'm very optimistic and I have to be optimistic. I think that it's also me working that out, but it's inevitable, it's unavoidable.

Sean: Right. I suspect that we would all agree, although certainly again, thinking of the three most recent novels, these are timely. They would have been timely, 10 years ago, but I suspect we would agree that if there's one of a handful of silver linings from, say, the past four years of our American experience, is that it's really disabused many of us or those that really needed to be disabused of this notion that an election cycle, however it goes, if it goes your way, is sufficient, or that activism is something that happens at certain points of a year or a time.

We have seen repeatedly how years or even decades of progress can be wiped away with a swipe of a signature. I think there's this communal vigilance that occurs, which is why, for me, for a myriad of reasons, via these books and your writings are so relevant right now.

I'm curious if you would agree. Maybe that informs some of these artistic decisions that, on one hand, I would maintain – maybe cynically – that we need to bang the drum because people aren't paying attention. I think there's never been a better time. Again, partly because of the last four years, people are finally starting to pay attention. Art has a place to come in and reinforce some messaging that might not otherwise get through.

T.C.: I have to stand back from that for a moment because I don't think art should push a political point and you can look at my books and you know what I stand for from *The Tortilla Curtain* with immigration to all the novels I've written about the environment. I am just exploring something, I don't have a point I want to push on you. Your first points about how we can dramatize things in a way that the scientists delivering lectures can't. It's illustrated in the book *When the Killing's Done*, [unintelligible] out here, if you look real close, you can see the Chile Islands.

There was an event out there in the early 2000s, to remove old invasives and it was a huge controversy. They had to go out, hire hunters to kill 5500 pigs, and leave their corpses rotting there. I explored this, I wanted to find out, I got to know the biologists. I went out there.

When I did the tour for the book, the great thing was, a lot of scientists came, a lot of biologists came, and they said, in essence, Sean, we can lecture till we run out of breath, and nobody pays attention.

When you get under their skin with a story, it can really have an effect. Great, that's what fiction does, but my intention is not to wave a flag for any kind of political point. I'm just exploring this bizarre world in the only way I know how.

Jenny: I would echo that in many ways, because I feel like I'm such a slow writer, which makes me a bit of an anomaly here. There's no amount of trying to land in a moment that I could ever do, because I start thinking about something many years before. For me, all I feel like I can try to capture is what it feels like to be alive at a certain moment with different currents that are swirling around. I think that, to the degree that something becomes political, I feel like that word has been used as a cudgel against a lot of fiction to basically mean didactic.

I think political can just mean that you can tell what the author cares about and holds dear. I guess in that way, people would ask me, is it a political novel, and I would be like, "Yes, it definitely turned into one."

Nnedi: I agree with all of this. I think I would also add, or I would want to underline this idea of how stories can really get under people's skin. I think that the power of story cannot be underestimated and I guess I can only speak for myself with this, but I think I'm echoing what everyone else has said already, is that we don't go in with this idea to preach at anyone about any topic. At the same time, I'm a political person and these things are definitely swirling around in my mind. I'm not surprised when those issues come through strongly in the narrative. There's that.

Then, also one thing that I would like to specifically highlight is – there's something that science fiction and speculative fiction can do when it comes to just these well-trodden issues that we're hearing about every day. When you deal with those issues in a speculative fiction narrative, a lot of times it's like viewing it through a different lens. It's like viewing it through a cracked lens from a different perspective so it can make these issues that people are often tired of. It can make them so strange that they're new. Therefore, you can revisit them more easily and even in a more pointed way.

I think that speculative fiction has that ability to allow for these specific issues where you can speak very directly if you really want to, through this type of narrative in a way where you can get away with it. It still has that same result of getting under people's skin, because it's so weird and new.

Sean: Thank you all for that. That's a very good segue into – we can show instead of just discuss how each of you grapple with this and by reading some short passages and I'll have a couple of questions and then we'll move it into the larger discussion.

Jenny, if you're agreeable, I would love you to kick off the readings and if you want to set it up in any way, feel free to introduce or just jump right in.

Jenny: I'm going to read from just the little ways into the book. The narrator is a librarian who is someone that definitely is not in the middle of these climate questions as the book begins. She's one of these people that is pathologically empathetic to the people around her but so far that hasn't extended to necessarily things beyond the people that come in the library or her family or her friends.

Jenny reading from *Weather*:

I don't know what to do about this car service man. He told me business is down; no one is calling anymore. He had to let all his drivers go and is down to one car. He sleeps at work now so as to never miss a call. His wife has said she is going to leave him.

Mr. Jimmy. That's the name on the card he gave me. I try to use only his service now, not the better, faster one. Sometimes when I call his voice is groggy. He says always that he will be there in seven minutes, but it is much longer now.

I used to take a car service only if I was going to be late, but now I find I am building in double the amount of travel time. A bus would be the same or faster. Also, I could afford it. But what if I am the only customer he has left?

I'm late for the lecture now. And I was wrong about which building it's in. By the time I get there, Sylvia is almost through speaking. There's a big crowd. Behind her is a graph shaped like a hockey stick.

"What it means to be a good person, a moral person, is calculated differently in times of crisis than in ordinary circumstances," she says. She pulls up a slide of people having a picnic by a lake. Blue skies, green trees, white people.

"Suppose you go with some friends to the park to have a picnic. This act is, of course, morally neutral, but if you witness a group of children drowning in the lake and you continue to eat and chat, you have become monstrous."

The moderator makes a gesture to show it is time to wrap up. A line of men is forming behind the microphone. "I have both a question and a comment," they say. A young woman stands up to wait in line. I watch as she inches forward. Finally, she makes it to the front to ask her question.

"How do you maintain your optimism?"

I can't get to Sylvia afterward. There are too many people. I walk to the subway, trying to think about the world.

Young person worry: What if nothing I do matters?

Old person worry: What if everything I do does?

Sean: Thank you. Thank you for that, Jenny. Thank you for that book, the observations. I was really delighted when I saw that was the passage that you chose to read because that last one-two punch, in particular, I think, really clarifies the stakes as it relates to crisis and what we're talking about. First off, in the sense that I would submit that, the ridiculous cliché,

ignorance is bliss, is seldom as applicable as it is to climate change in that it's boring or if you do approach it with science, it's hard to get a handle on a macro level or a micro level.

Your narrative deals with a protagonist who gradually, through empathy, but also inability to continue to shut out these concerns that are pressing in and how they manifest. I think it was in one of the reviews, but they called attention to this notion of Twilight knowing to denote a space between denial and knowledge. I would say that's the crux or one of the cruxes of how the narrative unfolds. Would you speak a little bit about this space between denial and knowledge and how it relates to the narrative?

Jenny: Yes, I wish I'd come up with that phrase myself. I took it from a sociologist, Stanley Cohen who wrote a book with the daunting title, something like, looking away from atrocities, something like that. [*States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*] I used to try to force this book on people. Finally I realized, no, I'll just put his concept in. He was actually writing about apartheid originally, and also about some moments in the Holocaust. One of the things he says is that, there are times when people, something is very much in their interest not to know. That's what he calls the Twilight knowing because once you know it, you're not going to un-know it. I think that's what you're speaking to.

I've even had some friends who, after I went down the climate rabbit hole, they would say, "Well, tell me what you know," and some of their lives were so difficult already. They would just have so many things going on that I would think, "I'll tell you in a little while." [laughs] "You don't need to take this on right now."

I do think that one of the questions that Stanley Cohen is asking really is what does it mean to know something and not act. He talks about how there was this time in Brazil during a very repressive regime in the 1970s where he came up with the term. It was called innerism, where people would privately say that they were against the regime, but in public people would only talk about sports and food and et cetera, et cetera.

I just remember reading that and then reading this *New Yorker* food review that was just like, so astonishingly, end-of-Rome decadence. I just didn't remember, it was just like a strange thing to read right afterwards. I think that I'm always ping-ponging back and forth between wanting to look away and wanting to look directly at things.

Sean: If you'll indulge me, I will say, I'll reiterate that I think what *Weather* does so wonderfully is it really complicates this angst that we all are feeling from a variety of sources and this push and this pull of – perhaps as we've made the world or the world has made us or both, just getting through the day can be a very exhausting process.

Speaking of crisis and the environment in particular, it's becoming increasingly clear, if it hasn't already, that we cannot afford to continue to ignore it. I think that's what we talked, and you all articulated earlier – how do we grapple with politics with a lowercase p without preaching and without turning off a potential reader? I think that leads quite nicely to T.C.'s piece, which I think he's going to read a section from a story which I had the benefit of reading in its entirety. Speaking of going from the angst of something you can't quite pin down or articulate to something very specific. T.C., I'd love for you to read your passage.

T.C.: First of all, I could jump in on Jenny's talk.

Sean: Please.

T.C.: I love *Weather* and what I love best of all about it is how it captures this dislocation and confusion that we're bombarded constantly with all of this information. Yet we never get to go outside and look at anything or know anything anymore. That is the true angst and terror that she gets and she's also hilarious. [laughs]

Jenny: Thank you.

T.C.: I would just like to read the beginning of a story from my last book. I pointed out earlier that I'm a wise guy and as a wise guy, it's a way of hiding my confusion and horror about things. We are having a drought here in Santa Barbara. It went on for seven years. We had a break and now we're back in it again. In the third year of the drought, I wrote a funny story about what it's like, not realizing that it was going to go on forever, and it's going to be the Atacama Desert here eventually. The story is called “You Don't Miss Your Water Till The Well Runs Dry.”

T.C. reading:

A light rain fell at the end of the second year of the drought, a female rain, soft and indecisive, a kind of whisper in the trees that barely settled the dust around the clumps of dead grass. We took it for what it was, and if we were disappointed, if we yearned for a hard soaking rain, a macho rain crashing down in all its drain-rattling potency, we just shrugged and went about our business. What were we going to do, hire a rainmaker? Sacrifice goats? There were vagaries to the weather, seasonal variations spurred by the El Niño Southern Oscillation and the Pacific Decadal Oscillation and the Northern Hemisphere Hadley cell, and certainly the dry years would be followed by the wet in a cycle that had spun out over the centuries, the eons. Daily life was challenging enough—people had to go to the dentist, sit in traffic, pay taxes, cook dinner, work and eat and sleep. It would rain when it rained. No sense worrying over it. Nobody gave it much thought beyond the scaremongers in the newspaper and the talking heads on the television screen, until the third year went by in a succession of cloudless days and no rain came, not male, female, or androgynous.

It was that third year that broke our backs. We began to obsess over water, where it came from, where it was going, why there wasn’t enough of it. It got to the point where everything that wasn’t water related, whether it was the presidential election, the latest bombing, or the imminent extinction of the polar bear, receded into irrelevance. The third year was when it got personal.

For our part, my wife Micki and I had long since cut back our usage, so that when the restrictions came we were already at the bare minimum, the lawn a relic, the flower beds, once so lush, nothing more than brittle yellow sticks, the trees gaunt, the shrubs barely hanging on. If before we’d resented the spendthrifts with their emerald lawns and English ivy climbing up the walls of their houses, it was all the more intense now. When those people were forced to cut usage by 30 percent, they were dropping to the level at which we’d already arrived, and so our 30 percent cut amounted to a double penalty on us, the ones who’d been foolish enough to institute voluntary cuts when the governor first made his appeal. Not only was it insupportable—it was deeply unfair, the sort of thing that made a mockery of the notion of shared sacrifice. I began shaving dry, with only the spray foam to moisten my beard, and Micki stopped using makeup because she couldn’t abide the waste of having to wash it off. When our son came home for spring break (from Princeton, where it rained every other day) Micki taped a hand-lettered notice to the bathroom door: If it’s yellow, let it mellow; if it’s brown, flush it down. Next morning, when he turned on the shower—the very instant—I was there at the door, pounding on the panels, shouting “Two minutes, max!”

He was a good kid, Everett, forthright and equitable, and if he had a failing, here it was revealed: He'd actually turned the shower on. I couldn't believe it. And neither could Micki. She and I bathed once a week—in the tub, together—then used the bathwater to wash the clothes and bedsheets until finally we scooped up the remainder in plastic buckets and hauled it out to moisten the roots of our citrus trees, which were my pride and joy and the very last thing that would go in the vegetative triage that had seen the lawn sacrificed and then the flower beds and finally even the houseplants. At dinner that night (a hurried affair, Everett eager to go out prowling the local watering holes—bars, that is—with his friends who were likewise home on spring break), I tried to smooth things over and deliver a hydrological lesson at the same time. "Sorry if I overreacted this morning," I said, "but you've got to realize it's the whole Southwest. I mean, there just isn't any water. At any cost. Anywhere."

The sun was caught in the kitchen window, hanging there like an afterthought. It was warm, but not uncomfortably so. Not yet, anyway—all that still lay ahead.

Everett looked up, his fork suspended in midair over a generous portion of green curry shrimp and sticky rice takeout. He shrugged, as if to say he was fine with it. "I should have known better," he said, dipping his head to address his food.

"I hear they're recommissioning the desalination plant," Micki put in, hopeful, always hopeful. She had her hair up in a doo-rag and was wearing a white blouse that could have been whiter.

"Two years, minimum," I said, and I didn't mean it to sound like a rebuke, though I'm afraid it did. I was wrought up, all the little things of life magnified now, the things you take for granted during the good times. That was how tense the situation had become. "And something like nine million dollars, not that the money has anything to do with it—at this stage people'll pay anything, double, triple, they don't care—"

"But you can't bleed a stone," my son said, glancing up slyly.

"Or squeeze water out of it, either," I added, and we were all three of us grinning, crisis or no.

Sean: Thank you for that, T.C., and I'll say that reading the rest of that story did all you can ask from art because a couple of times I laughed out loud. It made me think, and there were a couple of moments where I was very furious, so mission accomplished. I want to give you a virtual high five because you already mentioned this, but in my notes, I had written, I think we're on the same page, the scene where you describe the couple bathing, then using that water to do the sheets, then using re-recycled water to water the citrus tree does exactly in a short, descriptive language what a 20-page scientific paper couldn't do. It shows the stakes without preaching. It shows the human effects and what is incumbent upon people trying to make a difference.

Both this story, and even in *The Terranauts*, your novels are able to articulate the stakes. I talked earlier about the micro-macro level, but you were able to bring to relief this notion of how, of course, every minor individual action leads to something much more profound and that's what it's called for but it also underscores those that aren't willing to do their part. There's where the tension lies and in the middle of this, as I alluded to at the very beginning of the talk, there's, of course, political and business machinations that are very interested in these results.

Talking about having lived through an experience like that and knowing it personally, what are the challenges or the opportunities, I guess, inherent in bringing something that you're really able to see and then articulate and look at it artistically?

T.C.: All three of us are doing the same thing in our fiction. We are looking at the larger picture of the world, our existence on this planet as apes in a meaningless universe, what are we going to do? What I do is try to live in nature as much as possible. It frees me. I'm like a boy when I'm out in nature. I like to go in nature, which is, of course, increasingly scarce where there's nobody else around. It's like a drug. I'm a child. I just see things. I don't see the bark beetles destroying the Sequoia trees. I just see the way the light is. I just love to be outside.

This property here, I dug a pond for the animals. This house is called Butterfly Woods. When I moved in here 28 years ago, the Western monarchs came here to nest and roost all winter. There were thousands. Now, there are hardly any. Yes, of course, I've planted milkweed for them and I've given them a water source, but the problems are so much deeper than what any one person can do. It's depressing, but I can't stop doing what I'm doing. It's a little bit.

Sean: Right on. More on that, I think, shortly but Nnedi, I want to make sure you read too, and then I've got a question for you, and then we can maybe open it up to some deeper thoughts on crisis, but like the others, feel free to set up. I know what you're reading from, but if you want to introduce it anyway you see fit, please do that.

Nnedi: Basically, I'm going to read the very beginning of my novella *Remote Control.* Not much setup necessary since it's the very beginning. I'm just going to jump into it. This is Chapter 1, titled Sankofa. It starts off with a quote. "You come at the king, you best not miss," and that's Omar Little from *The Wire,* the TV series.

Nnedi reading from *Remote Control*:

The moon was just rising when Sankofa came up the dirt road. Her leather sandals slapped her heels softly as she walked. Small swift steps made with small swift feet. When she passed by, the crickets did not stop singing, the owls did not stop hooting and the aardvark in the bushes beside the road did not stop foraging for termites. Yards behind her, in the darkness, trotted the small red-furred fox rumored to follow her wherever she went. This type of creature wasn't known to live in Ghana, but stranger things were always afoot when Sankofa was around.

Sankofa was fourteen years old, but her petite frame and chubby cheeks made her look closer to ten. Her outfit was a miniature version of what the older more affluent Mamprusi women of northern Ghana wore– a hand-dyed long yellow skirt, a matching top embroidered with expensive lace and a purple and yellow headband made of twisted cloth. She wore the gold hoop earrings, too. She'd done the head wrap exactly as her mother used to when her mother visited friends. Beneath the head wrap, Sankofa covered her bald head with a shorthaired black wig. She'd slathered her scalp with two extra coats of the thick shea butter she'd recently bought, so the wig wasn't itchy at all. She also applied a thin layer to her face, taking care to massage it into where her eyebrows used to be. Despite the night's cloying heat, the shea butter and her elaborate heavy outfit, she felt quite cool…at the moment.

A young man leaned against a mud hut smoking a cigarette in the dark. As he blew out smoke, he spotted her. Choking on the last puff, he cupped his hand over his mouth. "Sankofa is coming," he hollered in Ewe, grabbing the doorknob and shoving the door open. "Sankofa is coming!"

People peeked out windows, doorways, from around corners and over their shoulders. Nostrils flared, eyes were wide, mouths opened and healthy hearts pounded like crazy.

“Sankofa come, ooooo!” someone shouted in Pidgin English.

“Shia! Sankofa a ba!”

“Sankofa strolling!”

“Sankofa, Sankofa, ooo!

“Here she comes! Aaa ba ei!”

“Beware of remote control, o! The most powerful of all witchcraft!”

“Sankofa bird landing!”

Women scooped up toddlers playing in the dirt and ushered their older children inside. Doors shut. Steps quickened. Car doors slammed and those cars sped off.

The girl called Sankofa walked up the quiet deserted road of the town that was pretending to be full of ghosts. Her face was dark and sweet and her jaw was set. The only item she carried was the amulet bag a juju man had given her five years ago, not long after she left home. It softly bounced against her hip. Its contents were simple: a role of money that she rarely needed, a wind-up watch, a jar of shea butter bigger than a grown man’s fist, a hand drawn map of Accra and a tightly rolled up book. For the last week, her book had been an old old copy of No Orchids for Miss Blandish, a paper novel she barely understood yet enjoyed reading. Before that, a crumbling copy of Gulliver’s Travels.

The town was clearly not poor. There were a few huts, but they were well built and well kept. This night, though dark as a cave, Sankofa could see hints of bright light coming from within. People feared her but they still wanted to watch television. These mud huts had electricity. Beside them were modern homes, which equally feigned vacancy. Sankofa felt the town staring at her as she walked. It was hoping, wishing, praying that she would pass through, a wraith in the darkness.

She set her eye on the largest most modern-looking home in the neighborhood. The huge hulking white mansion with a red roof surrounded by a large white concrete gate topped with broken green bottle glass was easy to see. As she approached the white gate, she noticed a large black spider walking up the side. Its long strong legs and hairy robust body looked like the hand of a wraith.

“Good evening,” Sankofa said in Mampruli, as she stepped up to the gate’s door. The spider paused, seeming to acknowledge and greet her back. Then it continued on its way up, into the forest of broken glass on top of the gate. Sankofa smiled. Spiders always had better things to do. She wondered what story it would weave about her and how far the story would carry. She lifted her chin, raised a small fist and knocked on the gate’s door. “Excuse me, I would like to come in.”

Sean: There's so many things I want to thank you for. First, my heart raced when I got the excerpt and saw that you were very deliberately invoking Omar for *The Wire.* The novel has its

own rewards, of course, but if this introduces the uninitiated to the wonderful series, *The Wire*, that's a win-win.

I really appreciate how, especially the context of this discussion tonight and the other two writers' strategies, there's such a wonderful tension between technology and a world that at times is so steeped in folklore and at times almost primitive in terms of the disparity between the haves and have-nots.

I was trying to think of a way to ask a question that just didn't sound dumb, but I think the best way to ask is, how did you arrive at the strategy of really pushing this constant tension between a speculative type of fiction, steeped in folklore with sci-fi, but a very cutting edge contemporary events of how technology is impacting the environment, how it's impacting people, and the push and pull of how Sankofa – one of the quotes, is, early on, that she kills technology, literally through – Anyway, the tension that exists. Talk a little bit about how you develop these competing, but very complementary, strategies.

Nnedi: It's interesting. I think a lot of it has to do with me being Nigerian American. Both of my parents are Nigerian, they came here in 1969, but from a young age, they'd been taking my siblings and me back to Nigeria. Just to meet with family, get to know our heritage, all of that. I've been going since I was very young. As I got older, I started noticing more and understanding more because when I was little, it was all very much like, "This is paradise." And, "Oh, I would just love everybody and everything and all that."

As I got older, I started understanding narratives and just putting things and connecting the dots more. One thing that I really started noticing was the presence of technology because whenever we would visit, first, we would stay in Lagos, which is a big vibrant, modern city with skyscrapers and all of that. Then we would go to my parents' ancestral villages where you wouldn't have any running water or electricity, but you'd have these huge, enormous mansions. I really evoke that in the piece that I read. That was very much the kind of place that I was describing.

As I got older, I started noticing the presence of technology arriving in these places. Where you wouldn't have that infrastructure: running water, electricity, you'd have to use a generator, all of that, you were seeing cell phones arriving. I would see very traditional things with cell phones. It just utterly fascinated and intrigued me.

It just made me start thinking about these parts of the world, how are they going to be in the future? How is the future going to affect them? They're like leaping over certain stages. They're not getting the infrastructure, but they're getting this super-advanced, portable chargeable computer that you can have with you everywhere that carries so much, carries the world on it. How is that going to affect people?

It was seeing that and being in it, and then just thinking about it and seeing how easily it all wove in. You would see palm wine tappers, they tap palm sap at the top of trees and you would see them climb to the tree. This is a very traditional thing that's been done for thousands of years. They'd have a cell phone while they're doing that. You just see it weaving itself. You'd see technology weaving itself very seamlessly with these traditional ways. I was utterly fascinated by that. That was really where the seed was planted, for lack of a better term. That's how it all really started for me.

Sean: Thank you for that. Fortunately, I didn't feel any pressure to try to tie the three works we're talking about together because I think there's so much common ground, but I do feel like –

Jenny alluded to it earlier and I think everyone touched on it, the notion of reading about apocalypse and apocalypse porn and end of times.

What I think, one of the things I got from these three books, *Terranauts*, *Weather*, and *Remote Control*, is this notion that, there's the haves and the have-nots, but no matter how fastidiously we plan for whatever scenario that's coming, we're probably not going to be able to control it.

I think what these works also subtly underscore is this horrific disparity between how bad things happening to our environment are going to not impact people equally. A certain section of society might be okay, but for the vast majority of our population, they're not going to have the opportunity to run away or escape. I'm curious if any of you would like to address this notion of, even if we accept the apocalypse, there is this reality that, inevitably, we are in the places that we live in and we'll be affected accordingly.

Jenny: Go ahead.

Nnedi: No, go ahead.

Jenny: I was just going to say, I think a lot about this William Gibson quote where he said, "The future is here. It's just distributed unequally." I think that's really true about climate change. I think that it is perhaps a comforting notion that it won't eventually affect all of us, I think it will, but I think this is the brutal cutting thing about it, that it is most affecting the people who have had the least of the benefits of this fossil fuel extractive industry and world.

I think one of the things that, particularly, climate activists have really brought into the conversation is how important it is that we think about climate equity. If we in the West have been rolling along with using all these things this time, what does it mean to just say, "Now we're shutting it all down"?

I know I believed it for a long time, that it is all about your individual actions. I think that that really is a bill of goods we've been sold. That, in fact, there's a very small proportion of the world that is living in a truly decadent way. The sooner we realize that and the sooner we turn our attention away from this self-flagellation, and purity testing about who is the best environmentalist, I think the sooner we can think about what is fairness, about what is needed, where some places that need infrastructure are going to need that before we have the right green energy sources. In places like America, I think the reckoning is a quicker and harder one.

Sean: T.C. –

TC: What Nnedi just said, that was wonderful in that, the cell phone is a technology we couldn't have imagined. Yet, it leaps over that phase of having to build telephone poles and bring electric wires in. In that sense, and as she says, it allows people to have computer access and access to the world of knowledge, which wouldn't have happened if it weren't for this technology suddenly appearing. It's not all bad. It can make that leap and leap over all of that necessity.

Nnedi: I want to focus on that point of, there's a small percentage that can make the greatest change when it comes to the environment. That whole idea of the individual doing these small little things. Compared to that small percentage, the amount is just so huge. It's very frustrating that we're fed the narrative that the culprits are the individuals, and it's not. It's corporations. That's one thing.

I also think about this idea, and I don't think we think about it enough, there's definitely a lopsided aspect to who gets affected. That's very known, but for those who are on that other end, regardless of what happened, they're going to be affected too. They need to remember that. I always think about that phrase, you can't build a palace in a ghetto. You got to remember that, because if you build that palace, it's going to get torn down.

I'm thinking about when the pandemic happened, and you saw what the billionaires were doing and how they were escaping to the – Let's say the pandemic had wiped everybody out. Okay, you've escaped to your paradise, but when you come out, you're going to be alone. You're still going to be alone.

I think it's something that we truly are in this together and that sentiment of escape, there is no escape. This is our planet. I think that needs to be remembered, but of course, we know that those who have the least are most affected by climate change most quickly. That's definitely known. There are groups of people that have already been greatly affected by the way we've behaved in the past, already. In the past. That's the other side of it.

Sean: I appreciate some of the pushback from T.C. earlier because I certainly didn't want to give anyone the impression – that's watching or listening – that I'm advocating for politics in art. In fact, I'm trying to say what you all have articulated wonderfully, which is, art can make it so that you can convey things of political urgency without turning off a reader.

I always have to take the opportunity to point out one of my favorite quotes from Orwell, which is, he said, "The opinion that art should not be political is itself a political attitude." I think there's a tension in there of, during dire times, it seems to be almost irresponsible to not try to grapple a little bit with what we're confronting.

I would just submit that none of the material that you all have written about, I find the least bit dispiriting or depressing. If anything, I think it's very optimistic and this notion of using art to stimulate awareness, stimulate discussion, and heck, maybe that leads to something like getting more people to vote and getting more people to get involved and using art as a force for positive thoughts. How do you all feel in terms of balancing the aforementioned urgency and trying to convey some of these things in a way that will leave the reader motivated?

T.C.: I don't see it that way, back to what we were talking about earlier. We're artists, we just make art. Why did John Coltrane play the saxophone? Because he was born to play it. Why do the three of us make stories? There's something in us that makes us make stories as a way of trying to figure out the earth.

As far as how it influences people, I'm delighted that I'm influencing people to feel somehow the way I feel, but that is not my intention, that's not why I write. I write as an exploration and it just happens. You don't choose your themes, they come to you. I look at all of my work, I'm obsessed by our place as an animal on this planet and what it is all about.

Of course, in this grim time, we see what it's about, is sort of a suicide of our species and taking all the rest of the creatures down with us, but I would like to give you the good news. The good news is that in 3.5 to 4 billion years, the sun will swell up and this planet and everything we've done and who we are will be like a giant charcoal briquette floating through space. That's –

Nnedi: Yes. Right, can't wait.

TC: Yes, me too. Let's have a party.

[laughs]

Sean: Jenny, what do you think about that or what I said but even what T.C. said or what you want to say?

Jenny: Yes. I'm interested in both of those ideas. I think that, for me, it feels like, at least the writers and artists I know, whose work I really admire, there's a way in which it's like they're picking up atmospheric elements.

The question of whether or not, for example, in a time of, it seemed to me, actively encroaching fascism, the question whether or not I was going to write about what it would mean to be a good German, it wasn't a question exactly. It was just one of the things that was in my head, because of what it felt like to be alive in this moment in America.

I once went on, it was my very first book tour and it was the first thing I ever went on, where it's some small TV thing. At the end, the woman just looked at me and she said, "Well, you said this and this about your novel, what's the takeaway?" I was like, "Oh, there's no takeaway." She tried to help me and she was like, "No, what do you want people to–? Why should people buy your book?"

I said, "Oh, they don't have to, it's just something that I'm thinking about and if someone wants to read it, that's the conversation." This person was so irritated by that answer, because it was like, "Why would you write a whole book if you had a takeaway?" You don't have that, but to me, I, as a writer, tried to write honestly about what I – I frankly put off writing this book for a long time because I thought I was going to write a really crappy novel. I just was like, "I don't want to do it. I'm going to write a–"

There's a Lorrie Moore story where the narrator is talking about her kid getting cancer and her husband says, "You need to write this down." She's like, "That's not my stop. I do whimsical moments and the such and such and dark humor." That's what I thought, but I also feel like the climate stuff is an everything story. We talk about nature like it's something apart from us, but there's a moment in *Weather* where the little kid sees a sign in the door and it says, "No animals allowed," and he says, "But we're animals, aren't we?" The mother's like, "Don't be a stickler," but I do feel like we're all animals.

T.C.: Nature bites back, that's for damn sure, and we're feeling it right now. Sean, you were mentioning my book, *The Terranauts.* For those who don't know, this is about a fictional version of trying to create a world separately as they did in the Arizona desert. Put eight people in there: four men, four women, for a given period to see if they could have a self-sustaining ecosystem.

They could, but with enormous outside help. Again, Elizabeth Kolbert said this when we were all excited about Mars, "Instead of trying to build someplace and create an ecosystem on Mars, why don't we just take better care of this one?" Because it's so complex, you can't do it. It's impossible.

Jenny: I hate this stuff where we're going to go to Mars instead. Just take all your resources, Elon, and make some resilient things here. [laughs]

T.C.: There are some members of the US Senate I wouldn't mind sending to Mars.

[laughter]

Jenny: Yes, I would definitely send some people off. I like that idea. They can start the colony.

Sean: Nnedi, did you want to jump in on that?

Nnedi: Oh, as far as Mars? I'm for exploring Mars, but yes, take care of our giant spaceship here because there's nothing like it, but I'm all for space exploration. The curiosity that I have for what's out there and how we could live out there. I love the idea of the multi-tiered approach, so there's that.

To speak to that idea of "what's the takeaway?" That question always bugs the hell out of me. My instinct is always like, "I don't know. What do you think it is?" I think a lot of it has to do with, when I write, I am the type of writer who doesn't outline. I don't outline, I just sit down and start writing. I'm a pantser or whatever. I just sit down, fly by the seat of my pants, and whatever comes is what comes. I don't outline. When I world build, and people say that I'm a really good world builder, but it's all in my mind, I don't map things out. Don't write things out. I just sit down and just start writing, and then what comes, comes. So, that question of, "What were you thinking when you wrote this?" I don't even know how to address that or answer that.

T.C.: I agree. That's the way we all work. It's an improvisation. It'd be too abstract to write – If you could write it all out beforehand, why bother? I never know what's going to happen or where it's going to go or what it means, but, of course, as we go on, it accretes and we begin to understand what it is that we're doing. Of course, it has to be improvisatory; otherwise, write an essay. That's okay.

Sean: I want to differentiate between purposeless and methodically planned out. I came with receipts. For instance, Nnedi, there's a wonderful moment toward the end of your novella, where Sankofa sees the words, "Africans are not lab rats" carved into a tree, then she notices this lush opulent hotel, which is now twice as opulent as it was the last time she saw it.

I'm not suggesting that you had an agenda and I'm not advocating for any artist to go into a project with an agenda, but a passage like that has a purpose. It is trying to make people see something a different way or for the first time. That's where I'm coming from in terms of – what is this art doing? By no means do I mean to suggest that any of you can or should, or any writer is pamphleteering. That's exactly the opposite of what I'm trying to articulate, but there is a hope that I think with writing like this, it might get some hearts and minds to think about things other than big Macs and cell phones.

T.C.: Of course, you're absolutely right. Yes, the passage that you just mentioned, we discover what our point is in any given story or novel. I'm just saying that it's improvisatory because we want to discover, we want to make this. Once we make the discovery, we're giving it to you.

I don't know Jenny and Nnedi beyond their work, but I think we all, three of us, are deeply, deeply, politically committed and committed to the notion of the freedom of art and of helping to do a little bit to repair some of the damage that our species has done to this planet, of course.

Sean: Jenny, Nnedi, you want to–

Jenny: Go ahead.

Nnedi: Really quickly, to address that specific passage. I feel like I'm repeating myself. When I wrote that, because I remember when I wrote that, it was at the time where that hashtag was raging. It was in my head. I previously didn't mean to put it in there. When I sat down to write, it was there and then it being right there with that huge hotel, it just made sense. It wasn't necessarily planned like that.

It's like when I look back and when I go back and edit, that's when you start noticing the things, the themes, and the ideas that are in there. When I look back and edit it, I was like, "Oh, that's interesting." It wasn't like I did that intentionally and then I'd go back and strengthen it and strengthen it. The process itself has that where you're improvising as you're doing – It's hard to explain.

Jenny: No, I think that's such a good distinction, though. In the editing process, you see what you've done. That's, to me, when the reverse engineering begins a little bit, where I'm like, "Oh, I made this thing." I say this all the time to my students and I don't always follow it myself. I'm always saying, "Look, your writing brain is smarter than your analytical brain."

If you think it out beforehand, it's going to be more schematic than you want it to be. If you see how you write and then you go back and rigorously see what came up, I actually sometimes take things out because I think they're too on the nose, even though I didn't mean to put them in. I think, "Well, that's going to seem too much." I do feel like that process where you have to go back and go through it and see what came out, to me, that's where the things that maybe a critic picks up on. Your brain had a structure and you just hadn't found it yet. You hadn't found the forum until you finished the piece.

T.C.: Yes, and it's all very frightening because you don't know what it's going to be or whether it will work. Since we've done it before, we think, "Well, maybe I can do it again."

Jenny: I would think just the opposite. Maybe I can never do it again. That's what I think about every single book, I don't think enough –

T.C.: I don't want to show it to you right now. I always keep a loaded .357 magnum right here on my desk in case I have writer's block.

Jenny: Good to know. I'll try that one.

Sean: Upping the stakes. I'm going to interject briefly to say that we're almost at our audience Q&A. Anyone that is with us right now, feel free to submit, and I'll try to get to as many of them as I can. It's 8:14, so I think no time like the present to try to entertain. I'm trying to pay attention and make sure I'm seeing these.

Here's one, I think, for everybody, from Sharon November. “Which backless novels seem prescient now, or alas have come true, or are there present novels around that notion of crisis that offer some hope?”

Jenny: Well, the *Parable of the Sower.* Octavia Butler, I don't know anyone who saw in that way exactly from that point. She even figured out that there would be cults, which I feel like we've just seen. Back to what Nnedi was saying about being excited about space travel too, I love that book because that narrator is saying, "We have to prepare now. These walls aren't going to hold forever."

There's also this dream that someday *Earthseed* will go beyond. Some of the scenes in that book are about as dark as you can get on the page, and yet, that's not the whole feeling of it. For me, she was really quite extraordinary. I just taught it again this year, and I thought to myself, "Wow." My students every 10 years or whatever, they think it's brand new. She's one of them for me.

T.C.: I have one for you, *Fiskadoro* by Denis Johnson. One of my favorite books of all time. Lyrical, beautiful book about post-apocalypse. What it is, what culture is, how is culture built, how do we recede it especially if there's been this massive interruption? And how myth and rumor start to build a new culture all together. To me, it's one of the most beautiful books I've ever read.

Jenny: I love that book too.

Nnedi: Yes, you took mine, *Parable*–

Jenny: Oh, I'm sorry.

Nnedi: It's an obvious one. It's the most obvious one.

Jenny: It's the obvious one.

Nnedi: It's the obvious choice.

Jenny: Are you adapting it? Is that what I heard at the beginning?

Nnedi: No, I'm adapting *Wild Seed.*

Jenny: Oh, cool.

Nnedi: Adapting *Parable of the Sower,* no, no, no, won't do that. I wasn't even able to, at the beginning – actually, throughout the pandemic, even now, I have a hard time returning to it because I just kept thinking about it. I'm like, "This is exactly what she wrote." I remember how it went. I could not have – No, I will happily leave that to someone else, but I will watch it.

Sean: Nnedi, I've got a specific question for you. It comes to us from Lagos and it asks, “I'm wondering what your research process is like, and how you stay away from massive drops of information during world-building?”

Nnedi: There will always be massive drops of information, but my research process, it's very nonlinear and it's very heavily reliant on as many primary sources as I can get. I have a lot of masquerades and a lot of Igbo culture in my work, so you know that I'm talking to people who either practice those cultures or know them very, very well.

I like to have primary sources, word-of-mouth because research via books, of course, it's good, but a lot of times the books – This is something that actually became a running theme in my *Akata* series, where you have to pay attention to how you get information because the research that I was doing, especially academic journals, which are the best when it comes to research, but I was digging into these really old academic journals, and a lot of them were extremely racist, or these anthropologists were going into these communities and trying to get information about secret things, secret beliefs, and the people, you knew they were lying to the

anthropologists. So, the anthropologists' information was great, but you knew it was riddled with lies, you had to undo all of that.

My research is very nonlinear, but I'd like to start with word of mouth. I like really old, old academic articles and then getting as close to those things as possible.

Another example is, in one of my stories in my novel *Lagoon*, I had a scene where someone rides a manatee – Okay, fine, there's a lot of context needed for that. I needed to know what a manatee felt like to even write that. Of course, I wasn't able to get close to a manatee. I was only able to see one from afar, but I wasn't able to get close enough to touch it. I found a way where I could get close to a beluga whale and touched the beluga whale. I did that. I like to get really, really close, but my research tends to be very nonlinear and it also tends to be backwards because a lot of times, the research is what leads me to what I'm writing. It's not that I look for something, I have an idea of, this is what I want to find, and I go and find it. It's just me being curious about the world.

Sean: Sure. That's probably the impetus or the beginning of all creativity comes from that unbelievable curiosity and then combined with empathy, and then the cultivation of talent. T.C., I want to give you prompts. We didn't really get a chance to talk about *The Terranauts*, and I know you're a very smart man, but it certainly seemed like you did a little homework. There's some tremendous detail and knowledge of the earth and I'm sure that would be a fitting addendum to the previous question, which is in terms of researching a book like that, how fastidious was your research to pull that off?

T.C.: Well, of course, we can do anything we want. We can write historical novels and change history and it's a lot of fun. We go where we want. However, I choose a topic like *The Terranauts* because I want to give you the science. The science fascinated me and it was relatively easy because so much had been written about it, day-by-day accounts and how it worked inside the dome and how they produced oxygen and balanced it and so on. All that was quite fascinating to me. My job was to imagine this: Four men, four women locked in together for two years, that's all I needed.

Jenny: Did you see that documentary that just came out about the–

TC: I have not.

Jenny: That's interesting. You pre-wrote it by quite a bit.

[laughter]

Sean: Let's see. There's one question specifically for you, T.C., that asks – Well, it mentions Louise Erdrich, that apparently she – I didn't know this, she goes back to her novels and revises them sometimes significantly after they're published. A specific question, “have you ever or would you ever make any changes to *A Friend of the Earth*?” I don't know if anyone else has any impulse to ever – I know I've got my own opinions on this as a writer, but in fairness to the query, T.C., you go first. Then if anyone else has any thoughts on revising it…

T.C.: I'm working on my 31st now, it's called *Blue Skies* and it's projecting into the future as *A Friend Of The Earth* projected into the future, along the lines of what we've been talking about today. I am so excited by what's happening around me every day, everywhere. I couldn't

imagine going back to the previous work. It exists in its time. I'm happy with it. I'm proud of it. I wouldn't have published it if I didn't think it was exactly what I wanted it to be in its time.

I very rarely go back to any of them except for some of the short stories, I love to go on stage and perform for an audience. I wind up performing some of the same stories over and over because they work. They're for the page, but they work in public as well. Otherwise, I don't really have such a grasp on all the stuff of the past, I don't want to reread it.

What's so interesting, and I think all three of us can relate to this is, you're on a book tour and you've got wonderful journalists. They read your book yesterday. You're well into the next one. Now, you've completely forgotten the book you wrote last year, so I fake it.

Sean: Great answer. Jenny, Nnedi, what do you think?

Nnedi: Oh, that thing of being asked about books that you're way past, that is something else. I've had where you have to be an expert on your book now, like four books away. It's tough, I think it, too. I definitely fake it, but it can be just very jarring. The idea of going back and editing something that's already been published nauseates me.

Mind you, I'm not saying that I think the thing that's been published is perfect. I can open, especially my earliest works, I open them and just look at it, I can't even read them because in my mind, I'll just start line editing the thing. I can't even do that. They're certainly not perfect, but at the same time, they're like my children. It's like, bringing them back inside you and then rebirthing them is just not possible, it's not logical and seems very disrespectful.

T.C.: And it hurts. It must hurt.

Nnedi: And it hurts.

T.C.: I'm with you. I wouldn't consider it.

Jenny: I think I'm the kind of person that has to have every novel I write wrenched out in my hot little hands eventually because I will just keep thinking that I – which is so funny because they're so short. I feel like when I say that, people are like, "Really, what were you doing?"

I think that once it is out in the world, the feeling I have when I've actually finished a book is, I just wake up in the morning and I'm like, "That huge weight is not on my chest because it's gone. I did it." It's a little sad because you've been living in this world and it's interesting to you, but it's also, by the end I've wrecked my life and my health. Everyone's so mad at me at the end of a book. Everybody's mad. Everybody's pissed off. It feels like I couldn't go backwards, even as I would like to sometimes. I sometimes in readings will cheat a little bit and take out a word or something that I think is off, but that's it.

T.C.: Yes. You feel exhausted after doing your work and yet you're a writer, so you have to do it again. I wrote an essay about this many years ago called “This Monkey, My Back” in which I likened what we do to a heroin addiction. When you get to the end of any piece, the exhilaration – It's hard to explain to people who don't do this. The exhilaration of seeing it come together, especially as we talked earlier, that we don't know what it's going to be.

It's so exciting and so tremendous.

Then, you got to do it again and again. It's like an obsessive-compulsive disorder. I can't help it. I have to do it because again, as we're talking in this wonderful conversation, everything is so confusing and bizarre about our ape life on this mysterious planet. How can we stop trying to understand it?

Jenny: To be honest, I found that really hard about the pandemic. It's the first super – Well, I guess I didn't write about 9/11 either. It's the first really devastating thing that I've experienced that some part of me wasn't taking notes. Maybe I was a little bit, but the fact where the whole world was experiencing it on some level, it took away a little secret way that I am as a writer.

That part of my brain wasn't activated because I might notice something that I was like, "Oh, how odd I haven't touched money." I'm touching money. I might notice some little writer thing, but I would also be like 8,000 people are probably thinking this at the same moment. I think that with the pandemic, it's going to be something to live through that I didn't have any distance.

T.C.: Yes. I'm feeling the same way, Jenny. I wrote a story called the *13th Day* about the cruise ships last March before we had any idea exactly what this was going to turn into. My agent said, "There's no way. There's no way we can – It's funny and bizarre and a lot of people have died in the interval.

Jenny: Yes, and now it's like, it's not familiar.

T.C.: [unintelligible] stuck in the next book, but I don't know if anybody's going to see it before then. I'm with you on that.

Jenny: Yes.

Sean: Nnedi, I'm going to give you the – Believe it or not, we're at 8:30. My worst fear's confirmed that while absolutely enjoying this discussion, didn't even scratch the surface of all the questions I wanted to ask, but fodder for more conversation and we did the best we could, but Nnedi, I definitely want to give you a chance to say something at the end.

Nnedi: Oh, I'm good.

[laughter]

Sean: Well, I want to thank all of you, not only for taking part in this conversation and enlightening me, enlightening everyone that was paying attention, but for writing these books and doing the writing, I think you're proving that leave the politics to the politicians and the pamphleteering.

My takeaway or my big takeaway from all of these works is that it does give me a sense of renewed optimism that as a species, we're trying to grapple, we're still curious. We still have empathy. We still have frustration. Rather than rail the sky or be lulled into apathy, some of us are trying to do something about it, and some beautiful things come out of that. I certainly am very grateful for you all taking the time.

Jenny: Thanks so much, Sean. It's been a great conversation.

Sean: Thank you all. I'd like to introduce Gwydion Suilebhan who runs the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, he's the Executive Director. If I'm not mistaken, Gwydion wants to say a few words before we sign off. Gwydion, if you are there –

Gwydion Suilebhan: I am here. Yes.

Sean: Hello, sir.

Gwydion: Thank you. Hello, my friend. Thank you, all of you, for this tremendous conversation. I'm really, really grateful to you all for being our guests. To all of you who are joining us remotely, thank you for making this another incredible Literary Conversation. We really couldn't complete what we do without your participation. You matter, you help us fulfill our mission. We couldn't do it without you.

I wanted to close tonight by dropping our donation link back in the chat window.

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

PEN/Faulkner has continued to stay really strong throughout the immediate crisis of this pandemic. Part of what's given us hope in that time has been the support that you all have been giving us.

On a personal level, for me, part of what's gotten me through is reading, honestly. Reading keeps me connected to a larger world than the one we're all confined to, reading takes you places. Books have the ability to help us bear up under difficult circumstances. That is why we at PEN/Faulkner worked really hard to put books into the hands of DC students, for whom, even in good times, access to stories can be difficult. We want to give them the meaningful literary experiences that we all treasure and value.

Even a small donation like $15 can totally transform one young person's reading life. If you can manage $15 a month, it really helps us do the same thing over and over again, and build a culture of literary interest among the young students that we serve throughout Washington, DC. Thank you very much for being here. Thank you again for anything you can do for PEN/Faulkner. We wish you a good night.

Sean: Farewell.