Literary Conversations: Finding Home

November 27, 2018

Finding Home took place on November 27, 2018 at the Jack Morton Auditorium in partnership with GWU's Institute for Middle East Studies. Moderator **Hannah Allam** was in conversation with authors **Osama Alomar**, **Susan Darraj**, and **Laila Halaby** about the intricacies of Arab American identity and what "Finding Home" looks like for an Arab American.

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Shahenda Helmy: Hello, everyone. Hi, our responsive crowd. That's good. Thank you all so much for being here. My name is Shahenda Helmy and I'm the Programs Director at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. I'm so pleased to welcome you all to our second Literary Conversation of the season, co-hosted tonight by the Institute for Middle East Studies here at the George Washington University. I'd, firstly, like to thank the Institute for co-sponsoring this event here with us tonight and for making it possible. I'd especially like to thank their outreach coordinator, Alison Kysia, who has, I think, been in correspondence with me about this since early July to bring this night together. Thank you, Alison, and that entire team.

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation is a literary arts nonprofit that's based here in Washington, DC but has a wide and national reach. While we're most known for our Award for Fiction, which is one of the top three literary prizes in the United States, we are proud to say that we have expanded to become so much more than that in the years since our inception. Our public programming events, including our Literary Conversations, bring authors from all over the country to DC to engage in a conversation not only about their work but also about the most pressing issues facing our world today.

Our Writers in Schools program brings free books and author visits into DC public and public charter schools. We've found that these visits with real living authors leave students with the knowledge that they do have a story to tell and that there are people out there who are eager to hear it. Our work would not be possible without the generosity of our grantors and our donors. Speaking of donors, in case you don't know, today is Giving Tuesday, an international day of charitable giving that encourages people to give to the organizations that mean the most to them.

I'm sure that you all have many causes to be passionate about but I hope that you'll make the PEN/Faulkner Foundation one of them by donating tonight. If you'd like to donate to our organization, please see our bookselling table outside, where we've got volunteers equipped with credit card readers, ready to take donations in any amount because no donation is too small and I truly mean that.

Enough with the shameless plug, our conversation tonight feels especially important nowadays. No one can deny that we live in a country in a world where immigrant voices seem to be silenced. Our three featured authors tonight have done anything but shy away from their Arab American identity. In fact, as you'll see tonight, it is quite central to their work as it is central to their lives. Leading the conversation tonight as Hannah Allam, a National Reporter for BuzzFeed News, whose reporting on Muslim Americans in the Trump era has earned her multiple national reporting prizes.

She has also spent many years with the McClatchy News Bureau and has served and covered the Iraq war in Baghdad and the Arab Spring uprising in Cairo, Egypt – many events that have affected not just the Arab world but the world as a whole. We are so honored to have Hannah here and all three of our incredible authors. Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Hannah Allam, Susan Darraj, Osama Alomar, and Laila Halaby.

[applause]

Hannah Allam: Good evening, everyone. I'm Hannah Allam. Thank you very much for joining us tonight. Thank you to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for sponsoring this Literary Conversation series or, as I like to think of it, a night with all the writers I wished I'd had access to growing up as an Egyptian American kid in Oklahoma. It's an honor to share the stage tonight with three accomplished writers whose work addresses timeless themes like identity and exile, as well as some of the most pressing issues of our day – human rights, immigration, foreign policy.

I am delighted to introduce, starting from here, Osama Alomar. He was born in Damascus, Syria, and now lives in Pittsburgh. He's the author of three acclaimed collections of short stories and a volume of poetry in Arabic. He performs as a musician. I forgot to ask, what do you play?

Osama Alomar: I was playing the Beatles.

Hannah: Playing the Beatles. There we go.

Osama: I was a guitar player and a singer.

Hannah: All right. Stick around for the after-party. Now, just joking. His short stories have been published in all your favorite publications – Ploughshares, TriQuarterly, the Southern Review, NewYorker.com, and many others. New Directions published *Fullblood Arabian,* a pamphlet-sized collection in 2014, and the story collection, *The Teeth of the Comb*, in 2017.

We have Susan Muaddi Darraj. Her short story collection from 2015, *A Curious Land: Stories from Home*, was named the winner of the AWP Grace Paley Prize for short fiction. It also won the 2016 Arab American Book Award, a 2016 American Book Award, and was shortlisted for a Palestine Book Award. In 2018, she was named a Ford Fellow by the United States Artists.

Laila Halaby on the end is the author of two novels, *Once in a Promised Land*, which the Washington Post listed as one of the best novels of 2007, and *West of the Jordan*, which won a

PEN/Beyond Margins Award. In 2012, she published a collection of poetry called *My Name on His Tongue*. She received a Fulbright scholarship to study folklore in Jordan.

I love this part of your bio, by the way – what started out as a project, listening to Palestinian refugee kids recount folktales, turned into a lifelong obsession with stories and creativity as an antidote to suffering. She's woven storytelling into her work with cancer patients, veterans, and refugees, survivors of torture and trauma. I think tonight we'll be exploring just that theme, the power of storytelling, and looking at questions of identity and representation. What does it mean to see yourself in the pages of a book? Who are the storytellers? Who are the gatekeepers? How are Arab American writers dealing with the current political pressures in their lives and in their work? We'll chat for a bit, listen to some of their readings and then open it up to all your questions.

[applause]

Hannah: You guys know I'm a reporter. I don't believe in the softball question. [laughter] I'm going to get right down to it. I thought that it might be helpful first to even describe what we're talking about when we say Arab American literature. There's a question that I've thought about ever since I heard it posed, it was in an essay in 2008 by Palestinian-American poet, Lisa Suhair Majaj. She asked basically, "Is there even such a thing as Arab American literature? Is there some Arab American essence defining and binding together individual texts as part of a larger whole?"

The three of you explore similar themes but in very different ways through very different narrative devices and characters. What are we talking about when we say Arab American literature? Easy, right?

Susan Darraj: You really are starting out with a difficult one.

Hannah: Is it enough to be an Arab American who writes literature? Is there a connective tissue beyond that that links these works?

Susan: I feel like there doesn't have – The early Arab American literature that I read, a lot of it was starting to come out in the '90s, a lot of it identified as Arab American because there were things related to food, there was always a grandmother who had magical powers, [chuckles] who made amazing magical food, these kinds of things, but you find that in a lot of the early writing of people of color. That's not unusual. I don't think that an author who's Arab American has to have anything that is identifiably Arab American in the work, but what I feel in my work that I'm trying to do is I have Arab American characters who –

I do have some sprinkling of Arabic in my books. I don't translate the words, I try to make them recognizable or understandable. For me, it's the Arab American characters, it's the use of the language, and also, there's usually a theme of being an outsider. There's that theme that runs through the book because that's been my experience. That's what I identify as Arab American about my work.

Hannah: What do you think, Laila?

Laila Halaby: I find that while there's the connector, the connective tissue is usually genealogy, it also puts you in this category – if you're Arab American, then you're not really American. We can put you over here and we'll read you during an ethnic studies class, but not in American literature. I think that is changing as there's more, and maybe that's a sweet little silver lining of technology because we have access to so much. I think more people are curious, but I don't know. Like you said, the connection with food, in some ways, it seems disingenuous, I think, to just tie us like that, because we are –

Hannah: It's too easy. It's not as nuanced. I've seen the same. We were talking about journalism and that feeling of being pigeonholed and how, yes, I might've liked the Paris bureau, but I was sent to Baghdad. How, in one sense, you want to be able to do whatever is available to everyone else, but at the same time, when there are stories that are sensitive and it is a community that's been stereotyped for however long since Valentino in the shaker. Who do you trust to tell these stories to?

Susan: And do you have a responsibility to tell that story, for it is a different story?

Hannah: Right. Since you've moved to the states, have you linked up with Arab American writers? Have you found a robust Arab American literary scene?

Osama: At the beginning, when I first came to the states, as you know, I drove a cab for 8 years. At that time, it was very difficult for me to find any writers, whether American or Arab writers. I was isolated in my car for 7 days a week, 10, 11, 12 hours a day.

Hannah: This was in Chicago?

Osama: It was in Chicago. In my first year, I couldn't write anything. I stopped writing, I stopped reading. I felt as if I became someone else, I lost my soul as a writer.

Hannah: I saw in an interview with you, you said that that feeling of driving a cab, when you'd rather be writing or doing something more creative was, what did you call it? A spiritual exile. In addition to the physical exile that you felt.

Osama: Exactly.

Hannah: What is that, what does it mean?

Osama: Actually, I don't know how to describe it. It's a very bad feeling, more than hardship. It was really a very bad feeling. I got depression because of that, but at the same time, I tried to be strong. I did my best to fool myself because I was looking for the future. I came to America to establish my name as a writer. I was looking for a new horizon, but I became a cab driver. Actually, my cousin said just a bit to drive a car because he said, it takes a while to publish your book. You have to be realistic and you have to find any job.

I applied everywhere, but it was for nothing. After a long argument with him, after two days from that argument, I was driving cab number 45 Horizon Taxi Company. In Syria, we used to say to the drivers take left, take right. In Chicago people say, go north, go south, go east. When people ask me to go north, I go south; go east, I go west. I have thousands of funny stories. Some of them open the door and run away.

[laughter]

Hannah: You weren't getting to have deep literary conversation, although, that you did – how did you power through that feeling of exile and out of being out of place and to create then in that, after that?

Osama: Later, I tried to go back to myself as a writer. I forced myself to go back to my writing, go back to my readings, start talking with the customers, not aggressive customers, not drunk customers.

Hannah: They have stories.

Osama: Some of them were very helpful. Not only some of them, many of them were very nice. I can tell you, I became the worst cab driver, not only America, in the whole world.

Hannah: It was also in that cab that you were working on the translation, right? How did that work?

Osama: Yes. Actually, I want to talk first about my translator, C.J. Collins. I first met him in Damascus in 2006. Then he became my best friend. He is such a wonderful person. At that time, I told him, maybe I will migrate to America, I will move to America. He said, "Once you get there, just send me an email and we'll keep in touch." I did that. He suggested to me, he said, "Do you want to translate your work into English?" I said, "Yes, of course." He flew from Boston to Chicago and we started translation in the front seat of my cab. Sometimes I was running away from my customers. I was losing money sometimes, but I wanted to translate it. It was a great opportunity for me.

Hannah: These two collections –

Osama: Were translated in the front seats.

Hannah: You had written those back in Syria.

Osama: Yes. Most of them were previously published in my Arabic books. I wrote some of them here.

Hannah: Before we get into a reading of them, I have to tell you that I read them with admiration but also, a bit of envy because when I was covering Syria and Iraq and different conflicts in the region, I would be given 2000 words to write a story and ask for another 1000. I felt like it didn't even come close to grasping the reality I was seeing on the ground. Yet, here you are with these

three-sentence short stories and just this incredible distillation of all of these complexities of the region. How did you gravitate toward that very short story genre? Can you talk a little bit about its history in Arab literature?

Osama: Actually, it was by accident, truly. I never tried to or chose the style, the style chose me. Since I was 13, 14, 15, I started to write, so at that time, I just wanted to express my feelings, to put my heart on my papers, to be honest with myself. Later, I was told, this is very short stories. Well, it's okay. What's the problem with that? I don't care about genre, I care about honesty.

Creativity, in my opinion, is honesty – to be honest with myself, to be honest with my reader. I can tell you, it takes me a long time to finish even one sentence.

Hannah: It's deceptively simple.

Osama: Yes. I always keep revising. I'm slow motion but it's good, anyway. In creative work it's very good to be slow motion. It takes me a long time. Some people think that it's very short stories so why it takes you a long time?

Hannah: Well, then when we read them, they pack that punch that sometimes sneaks up on you. Even after you've heard it for a while, I find myself thinking of some of the parables in your work.

Osama: I want to add something, besides that when I was driving a cab, I was singing the Beatles to stay strong.

[laughter]

Hannah: I feel like we have to hear some of your work now and I understand you're going to be reading some stories and poetry about human rights, human dignity, arrogance –

Osama: Most of my writing is about human dignity, about human rights, about arrogance.

Osama reading:

The Pride of the Garbage

When the owner of the house picked up the bag of garbage and headed out to the street to throw it in the dumpster, the bag was overwhelmed with the fear that she would be put side by side with her companions. But when the man placed her on top of all the others, she became intoxicated with her greatness and looked down at them with disdain.

The Pride of the Middle Finger

The middle finger couldn't resist the urgings of her own narcissism. "I'm better than all of you," she said hotly to her colleagues, "and I stand above you."

“How might you be better, oh vulnerable one?” asked the other fingers eyeing her with disapproval. “I'm the tallest,” she answered in a loud voice. Her head held high. Shock cut the tongues of the fingers, but they soon exploded in laughter. Nevertheless, the middle finger continued in a voice louder than before. “All of you must bow down in admiration and reverence to my greatness.”

Hiding their laughter, the other fingers bow down sarcastically, but the middle finger was greatly surprised to see the people in the street looking at her and laughing.

Osama: I will read one from my second book in English, *The Teeth of The Comb*. This one is very long. The Knife. I’m reading from my memory.

Osama reading:

He was born with a silver knife in his mouth. And he was its first victim.

Osama: The end.

[laughter]

Osama reading:

Tongue Tie

Before leaving for work, I tied my tongue into a great tie. My colleagues congratulated me on my elegance. They praise me to our boss, who expressed admiration and ordered all employees to follow my example. How did he sit on his mouth? The third world politely asked the first world to get off his chest so that he could breathe a little better. The first word obligingly gets up, but then promptly sat down on his mouth and released a terrible thought.

Priceless

After years of searching, I was finally led to the place where I could see freedom. She was on exhibit in a museum, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by thousands of heavily armed men. She looked sad and broken. When I asked one of the guards why she was there, he pulled me strongly by the arm and whispered in my ear, "She's priceless."

Osama: The last one. This one is extremely short. I'm true this time.

Osama reading:

Looking Down

I look down on the people from the highest wall of my lofty palace. In one voice, they shouted as loud as they could, "How small you are."

Osama: Thank you.

[applause]

Hannah: Listening to your reading, it just reminds me of – I mean there's humor, there's satire, we're laughing at parts, but then you sit with those words and underneath is actually often something quite devastating, a devastating truth.

Osama: Kind of black comedy.

Hannah: [chuckles] Arabs do gallows humor really well, I've found. How do Arabic-speaking audiences engage with your work and what do you hear? Because you've been, of course, well-known in Syria and published widely there, read widely there, before coming here. What do you see as different in the audience engagement here and there?

Osama: I get the same reaction in Syria and here, both. In Syria, I was told – in Syria you write in a very strange style. Even my mom and my father said that. My father was a philosophy teacher and he [taught] me and he guided me a lot to read specific books. At the same time, he said your style of writing is very strange to me, son. I got the same reaction here too.

Hannah: Maybe later we can also get into some of – the choice of personification, and the knife is alive, various animals are having thoughts. That's an old tradition in Arabic literature. Was that something you were consciously doing or was it just, that's how you knew stories to be told?

Osama: "Imagination is a big gift for humanity." Einstein said that. You can see inspiration everywhere, not only among humans – among objects, among animals. I feel there's always new creative ideas everywhere. You can make a story from a conversation, for instance, a conversation between two chairs, conversation between two walls, conversation between two cats, two dogs, between cat and dog. Endless.

Hannah: Susan, where you grew up and how you grew up is very different. It was in South Philly. An experience you drew on, you have drawn on in several of your works, especially the one that I really remember is – I don't want to get the name wrong – *The Inheritance of Exile*. These stories of young women on the cusp of adulthood coming into their own, their independence, their identities. I saw somewhere that you wrote your first story in the fourth grade in Philadelphia.

Susan: That was a terrible story.

Hannah: It was terrible. [laughs] Tonight, we shall be reading that.

Susan: No, I burned it.

[laughter]

Hannah: I was wondering, was there a role for literature in how your own Arab American identity was shaped? Did you see yourself in novels and poems growing up?

Susan: No, never. I grew up in an immigrant household, my parents came in 1967 from Palestine. I never read a work by an Arab American or a Palestinian American writer. It was the 1970s in Philadelphia, there was no representation at all. My Barbie dolls really made me feel bad about myself and about, really, I think girls growing up in that time having these dolls and these toys and these images of beauty that doesn't represent them is really quite devastating.

Literature, I would read *Anne of Green Gable*s, that was my favorite book of all, still is my favorite book, my daughter's reading it now, we're bonding over that. It's a wonderful experience. Anne, of course, is an outsider in her little town. She's the oddball. She's the different one and I think maybe that's why I connected with her, I always felt very different. I'm writing a children's book now, because I really don't see – even my daughter is asking, how come there are no books with Arab girls in them? I asked that question when I was her age, so it's about time.

I'm writing a children's chapter book series, starring an Arab American Girl. I'm very excited about it and my daughter is excited. She's edited me already. She likes it, but she has some suggestions.

Hannah: How old is she?

Susan: She's 12 so she has a lot of opinions. [chuckles] Things are different for her now, there are dolls that look like her. It's a new world. It's a changing world, our world is opening up, it doesn't feel that way all the time but it is, nevertheless – we are making progress. There are now more voices in publishing and that's very exciting. In my work, I do represent that time growing up as a daughter of Arab immigrants. But the other side of this is that in my house, growing up, there was always a role for literature.

My father loves poetry, and he would walk around just reciting lines of Arabic poetry and he would stop me no matter where I was. I could be carrying a load of laundry upstairs and he would say, "Susan, listen to this line I just remembered." He would tell me this line and explain it to me and we would have this conversation. My father plays [unintelligible]. He plays lots of music. He sings a lot. My mother was always reading so there was always a role for literature, for books in my house. That was really a gift to grow up in a house of readers. I think my love of books comes from that experience.

Hannah: When you decided to capture life for these young women in Philadelphia and in some of your other characters as well, how do you decide what goes in and what goes out and what to leave out? How conscious are you of the whole body of stereotypes and, I don't know, just really portrayals that I never found familiar or recognizable? Some weren't necessarily bad. It was just, I've never met an Arab like that. I don't know what – this doesn't ring true. How did you go about deciding what parts to share?

Susan: Virginia Woolf has this thing she says about how, for women writers, there's this angel in the house, this other woman who's always looking over your shoulder and telling you this is not

proper, this is not good. I think for Arab women writers, it might be like an auntie looking over your shoulders saying, don't say that, that's not nice, or don't portray us like this.

The truth is that we are really badly portrayed in the media already. Yet, I grew up in a family where I was taught you can love your culture and your people and still be critical of certain elements of your culture. As a fiction writer, even though I'm creating a world that's not factual, it's fictional, I still have to be an honest writer. I have to write honestly because actually, my first duty is not to the Arab community, it's not to my family, it's actually to my reader.

I take that very seriously. I try to portray what I see as the textured fabric of our community. I depict things that I think are wonderful things and I depict things that I think are not so great, that I've always struggled with some elements of our culture or certain people that I have met. I just try to be honest with my reader because that's my duty, I feel.

Hannah: Is that something you also have dealt with?

Laila: Very much so. I think it's very difficult to – You have flawed characters, that's just the nature of life but when you're already so maligned you're hesitant to say, okay, well, this person was an abuser or this person – but it's exactly what you're saying. As long as you're telling an honest story, I don't think it's – It's not gratuitous. I think what we struggle with is there's so much gratuitous negativity. There's no, like it's not –

Hannah: People go out of their way to –

Laila: Just to say it, rather than – you're not creating a complex human who is flawed. You're just showing the flaw.

Hannah: We've had a couple of major controversies on the literary scene around that idea of who gets to tell these stories, who gets to greenlight these stories, all the way down to the cover art, and the one that I'm thinking of first, there was the *American Heart* novel last year. It was quite an incident where a woman, an author, Laura Moriarty wrote this book about a futuristic Muslim detention camp in Nevada, but it was told through the eyes of a young white girl or woman who shepherds an older Muslim woman to safety.

Kirkus took the very rare step of removing a star from the review after a lot of people threw – there was a lot of outcry about the white savior trope. Here we go again. Then, just this week, we have seen it come up again with, I want to make sure I get the name right, the graphic novel *Suicide Bomber Sits in the Library*. It was pulled from publication after a lot of criticism, including a letter signed by more than a thousand writers, teachers, and readers about the stereotypes in the storyline. It's basically a brown kid walks into a library with a bomb strapped to his body.

Both of these fall under this debate going on where, in literature – but it's beyond it saying we're one side saying, well, this is what happens when groups that have been marginalized and stereotyped speak up about their portrayal. The other flip side to that is censorship. This is censorship, it's a slippery slope. If we start saying, you can tell the story and you can't, we're

going to end up in a place with less freedom to tell these stories, not more. Where do you fall on that debate? Is it something that you've dealt with personally?

Susan: Well, I signed that petition about the graphic novel –

Hannah: What bothered you about [unintelligible]?

Susan: Here's the thing, in a perfect world, if the publishing industry were really diverse and we had a lot of stories, it's very rare to have an Arab American published author or a Muslim American published author. It's really very, very rare. The publishing scene is still pretty homogenous. It's getting better, but it's still homogenous. In a perfect world, if we had lots of voices at the table, there's no reason why someone like a graphic novelist couldn't write that story, because there would be something else to balance it out.

But right now, we have this imbalance. What bothered me is, that story may or may have been seen as, like, a dominant narrative and it may have edged out opportunities for other writers to show a different side or present a different voice. I'm just tired of that whole – I'm just tired of that. For example, I just read the other day that there's going to be a movie made about the experience of Syrian refugees and it's being written by Lena Dunham. Like, there are no Syrian writers out there who can do this? Why are we edging out the voices of people who can tell those stories? Why is there that imbalance? So we still have that problem.

Hannah: Also, the same debate's going on in journalism as well. People ask me, why do you have the Muslim beat? Why does it – can it just be the religion beat, or whatever? In a perfect world, there wouldn't be a need for this. If you have a group that's been singled out in speeches, bans, executive orders, or whatever, I think it deserves scrutiny. Is there something, Osama or Laila, that this debate, this push and pull over telling – the agency of telling your own story versus telling someone else that they shouldn't tell that story, or you don't have the right to tell that story?

Laila: Well, I think what she was saying, it's really interesting about the balance of things. You don't have the other side. I've always been sort of 12 about it. You don't get to – it's sort of like, you don't get to talk about my mother, but I can say what I want. It's so much deeper than that because I think it has to do more with power. If I can tell your story, I control it. If I let you tell it, who knows how it's going to turn out? I think at the root of it is the power issue.

Hannah: Osama, in Syria, some of your poems and short stories, I wouldn't even say are thinly disguised critiques of the regime. They're full-on critiques. How did you get published there? What was that –

Osama: I published all my books in Lebanon, not in Syria. It cost me a lot of money, but at the same time, I wanted to avoid headache. I forgot to tell you about something. Besides I love this style, I wanted to avoid censorship too. I publish many stories in local journals and magazines in Syria. But when you write about objects, when you write about animals, they cannot catch you. Sometimes they would ask me, do you mean that? No, I didn't.

Hannah: It's just a knife. [laughs]

Osama: You can avoid censorship because this kind of stories take more than one interpretation, but I publish all my books in Lebanon and it's very easy for you, as a writer, to publish your books, just like this. [snaps finger]

Hannah: And what about distribution?

Osama: My publisher got the permission for distribution. It took him a long time. I was upset about that. He distributed in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt.

Hannah: How did you find the gatekeeping here when it came time to translate, when you decided you wanted to translate these collections into English? Did a publisher appear and say, "That sounds great, we'll sign you up"? How did that work? How did you go from driving a cab to having these two acclaimed –

Osama: Actually, I first published my stories here at New Magazine in New York City. My agent contacted the editor there. She told her, I want to collaborate with Osama. I want to work with him. I like his work. Actually, two agents called the editor at the New Magazine.

I was told I was lucky because I was told it's not easy at all to find a literary agent. We don't have the system in Syria. In America, you need an agent to get published. It's a very big country. There's big competition between writers. There's thousands of writers. We need agents. I was told I need an agent, anyway.

Hannah: Susan, you have two projects coming up that you're working on. You mentioned them earlier, could you say a little bit more, and then maybe we can hear the excerpt.

Susan: I just signed a four-book contract, I'm writing a children's chapter book series. It's the first chapter book series starring an Arab American character. I'm so excited about that. My daughter's very excited about that.

Hannah: 12-year-old [unintelligible].

Susan: Yes. It was actually her idea. Like I told you, she said to me, why are there no characters? I wrote the first couple of books already and I'm working on editing the first two and writing the third and the fourth one.

Hannah: When is it coming out?

Susan: January 2020, we launch the series. I'm excited. Then I have an adult literary novel that I'm working on now, it's tentatively titled *City of Brotherly Love.* It's set in Philadelphia, of course, in the 1970s. It's about a young man named Peter Saliba, whose parents are immigrants. It's a very tight-knit, small Palestinian American immigrant community. Peter has decided to marry a woman named Linda McMullan who is not Palestinian. His parents are devastated and angry. The whole neighborhood –

Hannah: I thought you were going to say everyone welcomes her with open arms.

Susan: They try to beat her. That's my novel that I'm working on right now. My agent has it. We're going back and forth with it now.

Hannah: Can we hear a little bit?

Susan: Yes, sure. In this scene, the family lives on Winslow Street in Philadelphia, which is an invented street. Linda is planning to make her appearance to meet Mr. and Mrs. Saliba. They're feeling very aggrieved by the whole thing.

Susan reading:

Within 24 hours, the arrival of Linda McMullan at 948 Winslow Street had become one of the neighborhood's most anticipated events, even more so than the upcoming papal visit. Mrs. Haddad is the nosy neighbor. Mrs. Haddad told the [unintelligible] who spilled the news like manna from heaven to 10 other families.

In her own home, Mrs. Saliba acted like she was starring in the spotlight of an Arab drama, a role in which she'd been reluctantly cast. Peter watched his mother prowl around the living room. "They're all talking, Abdullah," she said to her husband, walking over to where Mr. Saliba was listening to the news. With a huff, she flicked off the TV.

She locked her eyes to Peter's and spoke slowly and deliberately, "I am a hostage in this house. I can not leave the front door."

"Sorry, mama," he replied, buttoning his shirt.

"Do I deserve this?" She said.

"No, mama," he answered, willing to take her verbal sting so that perhaps she'd be exhausted by the time Linda arrived. "Are we serving anything?" He asked tentatively.

"Coffee," his father said firmly.

"No cakes, maybe some cookies?" Both Mr. and Mrs. Saliba looked up at their oldest son and he felt guilty. He thought about how when he'd been in high school, they had prayed and prayed for him to stay young until the war was over so he wouldn't be drafted like Mrs. Haddad's sons. He knew what they were thinking now, "Why is he trying to kill us? Doesn't he know that cookies are served only on happy occasions?" The insults did not end.

First, he had sat them down the night before and explained that he'd been dating this American without telling them for over a year.

"What kind of girl goes out with a boy on dates for a year without being engaged to him?" They'd asked.

"Don't you even think for a minute," his father said, "not for a minute that I'm going to call your uncles and go to her house and ask for her hand."

"Actually," Peter said shifting nervously, "you won't have to do that because I already, you know."

"What?" Mrs. Saliba said, her voice falling to a whisper. "You did what? You had the sex with her?"

Peter had looked startled and shook his head, "No." He paused. "Well, yes." His parents had both bolted up in shock.

"What I mean is that you won't have to ask for her hand because I already asked her to marry me. She's not expecting you to talk to her father or anything."

Mrs. Saliba had sat again like a log that had been dropped off a cliff. The old couch covered in plastic to protect the upholstery nearly buckled underneath her, and that was when the tears had erupted. Now she told him, "No. No cakes, nothing. No baklaw, nothing."

Peter swallowed his outrage. He had to get through this, he had to survive this. Nobody else in his family had married from outside of the community before.

"What will my mother say?" Mrs. Saliba was saying now. "Your teta will be heartbroken. I can't tell her about this."

Peter thought about his teta, Teta Maha who lived in Palestine in a refugee camp, that had become an almost permanent village. He hadn't seen her in years, although she called at least every other week.

The last time they'd visited Palestine, he and his brother had been 14, their sister Laila, 16. He'd learned to milk a goat because his brother had dared him to accompany Teta Maha to the small pen attached to her house, where two goats and four chickens lived. He'd been brave enough to feed the chickens, much to the delight of Teta and her neighbors.

"Look at the Americani feeding them right out of his hand like a fellahi." They clucked, laughing as they stood over the pen, warming their hands in the bodices of their embroidered dresses.

Laila had whispered to her brothers one evening that Teta Maha kept a lot of things in that hidden pocket in her bodice: her keys, her money, her Palestinian ID card, even her pills. Peter hadn't believed his sister, so he and his brother had spent an afternoon watching their grandmother carefully, following her from room to room in the small house as inconspicuously as possible until, in the kitchen, Johnny had seen her reach her blue veined hand into her bodice and pull out a book of matches. They burst into laughter collectively and fled the house.

"You crazy Americani children. What's wrong with you? You want to stop my heart?" She had shrieked, half-laughing herself ,after them.

The next day, having understood their game, she teased them by pulling a loaf of bread out of her bodice. "Here, eat your hummus with this." She told Peter.

An hour later, when Laila had popped out of the bathroom and asked for more toothpaste, Teta had pulled the tube out of her bodice, "Here you go, habibti, I didn't realize we were out."

As she turned and walked out of the room, they all heard her snicker. When they told their mother about it, Mrs. Saliba explained it to them in one sentence, "She will always be smarter than you."

Now he felt that his grandmother, who hadn't even met Linda, would be angry with him. Even worse, disappointed in him for this.

In Linda's mind, the Salibas were a family like that of her great grandparents who'd arrived from Ireland and landed in the Northeastern part of the city, poor and hungry and unsure of their footing. Peter knew that she felt allied to his family, all caught up in some sweet image of how they were one melting pot. Peter loved that generous nature of Linda's, and he wanted her to think well of his family, of his parents, because it reflected on him too.

He didn't want her to know that Mrs. Saliba's image of a melting pot looked more like a smoking cauldron and Mr. Saliba outright rejected her. They thought, and it hurt him to know this, that she, Linda from Ardmore who drove her own car, a 78 Tornado, who chatted about learning to cook Palestinian food, who loved the black hair on his chest, who thought he was sexy when he spoke in Arabic, they thought this girl wasn't good enough for their son.

And who was he? A 25-year-old who worked in Mr. Lerner's garage, who might be made assistant manager one day, only if Mr. Lerner's lazy son finally graduated from college and took a desk job somewhere. Peter's success depended on Mike Lerner's success. And as much as Peter didn't blame his boss for holding up his son, he hated the situation. Peter was good with customers. He was good with numbers. He could give estimates on a brake job on the phone while writing out a ticket for a drop-off for an oil change and not make one mistake.

The customers came in asking for Peter by name, and some assumed he already was a manager. If it weren't for his dark skin, they might even assume he was Mr. Lerner's son. Linda had thought so when she'd come in with her father one day and smiled at him. He'd felt important, significant, when she looked at him, when she hadn't hesitated in her smile. He wanted her to look at him that way every day for the rest of his lousy life, if his parents didn't ruin it first.

He left 948 Winslow Street heading to the bakery. His fiance was going to have cake, damn it. As he passed Mr. Stavrakos's stoop, the old Greek neighbor, the old man himself was leaning out the front window as he always did, his arms propped up on a pillow on the window sill.

"Hey, young man. Your girl coming today?"

"Yes, sir. She's meeting my parents tonight," Peter said.

"All right," the old man said grinning. "I'm ready for the fireworks."

[applause]

Susan: Thank you.

Hannah: Hearing that one, it's just so many familiar themes and all the things that, I think we've said, we didn't get to see growing up. There were books and genres where we did find stories of immigration. Again, for all the laughter, it is hard to deal with this stuff. It's hard to bring a newcomer and outsider into the circle and to figure out who you want to be and the whole expectation versus what you want to do with your life.

You and I had talked before, I think, about, even if you didn't find that in Arab American literature, you found it in other places. Can you talk about some of those influences?

Susan: Absolutely. Yes. As I said, growing up in this country in the '70s and '80s, there were not Arab American writers, at least writing in English, that I had access to. I actually was very deeply influenced by African American literature. June Jordan was writing poems about Palestine.

Hannah: That's right.

Susan: I still love her work. She was a magnificent human being, as well as a poet, and an activist. In fact, the title of my book, *A Curious Land*, is actually a quote from W.E.B Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk.* It's a line about when he went to Tennessee from Massachusetts and he says about the deep south, "What a curious land is this. It's filled with untold tragic stories." That's how I've always thought about Palestine. If people could just know what Palestine is really like, it's more than just a headline in the New York Times or on CNN. It's so much more than that. There's so many love stories and dramas and beautiful things.

I borrowed that line from Du Bois. I quoted that line in the book's epigraph. Yes, I was very deeply influenced by African American writers. I think, from them, I learned a way to express that feeling of being an outsider in a literary way.

Now I feel like I still read a lot of African American writers. Edwidge Danticat is one of my favorite writers. Rohinton Mistry is an Indian Canadian writer. I love his work. He writes historical novels about India. I still gravitate towards writers who are people of color, who are writing about the feeling of being that outsider in the Western world.

Hannah: Laila, in your work, there's also a theme that I've seen, that, again, expectation versus what you want to do, of belonging, of straddling worlds, of being called to be one person here and then going overseas, and a whole new set of rules and cultures and expectations. How did you decide to explore that in a literary way? When did that happen?

Did you have a strong Arab American identity growing up, or is that something you sort of came into? Some of your poetry suggests that, I guess, at some point in your life, you were made aware that, "Oh, you're actually not white."

Laila: Yes. Well, I think having both worlds, because I had the American world that I grew up in, and then my father was always absent, so I think how I identified was more with absence. Actually, I do remember. I had always written and I think writing was my way of just dealing with insanity and everything. But I do remember reading *Cry The Beloved Country* when I was like 16 or 17. I was like, "Oh, this is what you can do with your words."

That changed how I approach things. My mother's family, they're Scottish immigrants. It's like the other end of – gene pools never meant to come together. There was a lot of reading in our house, but it was very Western reading, very white reading. There really wasn't the understanding that I was not finding myself in all of these things, and my frustration with it.

Like I had mentioned, I remember going through the bookshelves and coming across a collection of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish. I was like, "Oh, okay." I think those books kind of led me on my path. It's like, it was always imposed on me, "You're Arab, you're Arab, you're Arab," but there wasn't the big tribe with all the food and the grannies to support that.

I think I always gravitated towards the outsider. I was thinking, when you were talking about the literature when you were younger, I was like, well, Judy Blume. I can't even remember what I read when I was younger, but for that same reason, I think, you're not finding yourself. You find yourself in the quirky.

Hannah: I came across a quote of yours, too – No, it's actually in one of your writings, where it was a line about how an immigrant family's hobbies are unnecessary. “There's no time for goofing off, especially when your mother's family has lost a country.” That was such a powerful and devastating line, especially when you think of that heaviness applied to a child, as it is today for a lot of displaced kids growing up in various kinds of conflict.

The case that your work seems to make is that there's a healing power to it. You've talked about that in your social services work as well. Is there something you can share from that, of seeing the power of storytelling in action? It's a hard time right now. There's a lot of pressure and it's easy to focus on the doom and gloom. The people that you're working with are going through, often, traumatic experiences. Have you seen the power of storytelling up close in that sense?

Laila: I really want to tell a story about – some wonderful refugee story who writes – That's not the story I'm going to tell. I worked at the VA in the polytrauma unit. I taught a creative writing class for a few years there. There's HIPAA, so there's only so much I can say anyhow, but I had a student who couldn't write a sentence. He may have had brain injuries and then other stuff. Writing sentences was really difficult.

I had a classroom – Also, I've got to say, this was my eye-opener into the military, it's a great equalizer because I had men, women, of all backgrounds, all ages. It was really interesting. They came at various levels of writing abilities, communication abilities, whatever.

This particular gentleman could not write more than a six-word sentence. I would do all these different exercises, like having chairs talk to each other, actually, is an amazing way for somebody who's struggling. You find different pathways to communicate. So I remember, I don't

know, maybe three or four weeks into the first class. He was with me the full three years, but about three or four weeks in – I would always bring a poem. Sometimes they resonate, sometimes they don't.

I brought the poem by Lucille Clifton, *My Sister Josephine*, which is tiny. If I had a memory, I would recite it. I don't have that memory. It's about her very flawed sister. Her father is dying and her sister comes home. It was like the whole class woke up and they debated, "Well, she wasn't a good person. She did these things." "No, no, no. She was great. She was great."

After that, this gentleman began to write. It was like something opened up. By the end, and I'm not saying this because – I just happened to be there, but he was writing stories. He was writing love poems.

This was somebody who – the speech therapist had said, he's never going to get beyond this. My takeaway from it, not very scientific, is that there is – the will to live that you mentioned earlier that pushes you and pushes you and finds a way. Sometimes stories are the door that gets you there.

Hannah: Maybe we can hear some of your poems now. You're doing poems.

Laila: I'm doing poems.

Hannah: Go ahead.

Laila: Essentially, it's stories.

Hannah: This is from which –

Laila: This is from *My Name on His Tongue*. I didn't really like poetry because I didn't get poetry. I had this funky poetry teacher who was from Kentucky. I remember him saying, "Poems are stories for people with really short attention spans." I'm like, "Okay." So, there you have it.

Hannah: How old were you when you wrote your first poem? Do you remember?

Laila: 18, 19. Stories were my thing, but I think this taught my stories to be more lyrical.

Laila reading:

Home

as a young child / when Home / was where you lived / and *where-you-are-from?*

was more about your parents / I thought / I belonged / to the Whites

because that / was where / my house was

I pretended / those children / with chisels / in their powdery hands

and spit in their wet pink mouths / didn't mean to hurt me / as they questioned

my name / my face / my place of birth / my father's absence

later / when I stared / in the mirror

examined my skin / peeled it back / peeked through / at tissues and veins

and blood / saw who / I really was / I opted / for the Arabs

erased all / whiteness / erased my house / let those warm / dark arms

hold me / love me / make me theirs / build me / a new house

it worked / for a while

until I found / that Home / is inside / not out

that the view changes / depending / where I sit / which window / I look out of

mixed blood / is like an old trailer / that's always frowned at / because no matter where

it's parked / it's always / out of place

on the other hand

you can drag it anywhere / if your hitch is strong enough

just be careful / if there's a hurricane / or tornado / yours / will be the first to go

Hannah: Wow, that's beautiful.

Laila: Thank you. This is “after a reading by Khaled Mattawa,” who's a Libyan poet who lives in the states.

Laila reading:

1

your place in the world is solid

my place in the world moves / without a schedule / is based on mishaps

unwanted affairs / political discord

my place drifts / between Here and There / West and East

sometimes gets lodged / In-Between

my place is a Somewhere / that cannot be found / on any map / was detached / as I was born

in a place that belonged / to neither of my parents

can't be an immigrant / if you haven't left somewhere

can't be native / if you're from somewhere else

which is why I'm fluent in the language of exiled souls

my place in the world / got misplaced like luggage / sometimes on clear days

or smoky nights / or during peace marches / or poetry readings

I remember the fine leather / the soft but durable hide / the confidence in the brass handle

my place peaks out during certain questions / who is your father? / are you related to the queen?

where is Palestine? / questions that can't be answered / by someone with no place

no wreckage to trace / all gone-before-me generations

2

my place re-relocated / with the arrival in airplanes / of 19 foreign nationals

my tent packed itself up / in the spitting face / of evangelical Christianity

vanished like Merlin / ebbed away / each time George W. Bush spoke

lost its permanent residence / misplaced its green card / folded itself up origami-like

catapulted into the cosmos

I know it is somewhere / drinking coffee / drinking whiskey / watching satellite TV / writing a poem

last night / when you told your story / in that sweet voice / that wrapped around

English, Arabic, French, and Italian / like a member of the Ringling brothers

my place popped out / between your words

under the shadows of your accent / next to your kind laughter

coated in the forgotten protocol of eastern greetings

it doesn't matter that you are a stranger / you're not really / you're a reflection

a visiting relative / to my Somewhere-In-Between / telling your story / my story

in lines that wooed some / confused others

with words that embrace me like a grandmother / like a lover

and for 58 minutes / brought me back / to my own / true / place.

Laila: Then, on a lighter note, this one is not published.

Laila reading:

at a rest stop / outside of Los Angeles / I have to pee

my son is grumpy / because he's tired or hungry / or 17

I ignore him / park the car

there are several clapboard buildings / labeled men, women / man, woman

workers in orange vests / wander through with brooms

men, women / man, woman

why are there so many buildings? / I study the signs and buildings

finally, enter one labeled women / double-check the tile / by the door with a stick figure in a dress

an older Sikh man / is standing by the sinks / he opens his mouth / to say something

but I have to pee / desperately enough / that I ignore him / and close the door / to the furthest stall

when I am done / he is still standing / by the sinks

I wash my hands / and feel him watching me / indignant.

this is the men's room / he says / in a tone / I am sure / he uses / with young nieces / who have behaved badly

it's the women's room / I say / no, it is not / he insists

I dry my hands / smile / we walk out together

my son watches / horrified / from our car

this is the men's room / he says

I point to the sign / with the word women / and the stick figure in a dress

he looks at it / then at the men's sign / that I point at / shakes his head / as though I am the fool in this story

see / he says / this is the men's room

I wish him a safe trip / as we part ways

and continue on our journey.

[applause]

Hannah: That's wonderful. I can't believe we've made it almost an hour without Trump coming up.

Laila: That's okay.

Hannah: That's okay, right? Maybe you guys can start asking questions because I've been told that we have just a couple of minutes left before we open it up to questions. I thought maybe, going back to the theme tonight of finding home, that before we open up for questions and the inevitable Trump and –

Susan: We're having such a good time.

Hannah: Right. Just what it means to work through this time. Maybe first just a quick rapid-fire response, no pressure, about what does home mean to you? What is home? How do you define that? Osama.

Osama: My home is a freedom, a human dignity, a human rights, equality. This is my home.

Susan: When you're Palestinian, you don't ever really have an easy answer to what you'll say, do you have a home? I would tell people I'm Palestinian, well, where is that on the map? It's not even on the map. You can't even point to where it is, but Palestinians are really good at recreating homes wherever they go. I think, for me, home is wherever my children are. Wherever they are, that's my home and I'll make it a home. I can make it feel safe and comfortable and happy for them and for us as a family.

Osama: I forgot to mention, where the Beatles are.

Hannah: Where the Beatles, yes. [laughs] What about you, Laila?

Laila: For me, home has always been people and family, more so than place, for obvious reasons. But I think, as I mentioned to you, I also think home is that place, that spot where

you're a little bit uncomfortable and you're maybe pure because you're opening yourself to the world in a different way.

Hannah: That's amazing. I hope you all have questions. I have to take a second to say shout out to Shahenda Helmy. Where is she? There we are. [applause] For making this night possible. Thank you. Shahenda, how are we doing questions – Okay, so we have mics there. Slow down, not everybody at once. We have a question here. Thank you.

Participant 1: It's more a word of gratitude. Being married to a man of Lebanese immigrant parents for 30 years, as the American, I'm definitely – What was her name again?

Susan: Linda McMullan.

Participant 1: I am Linda McMullan. I appreciated you incorporating that part of the Arab American experience because it is a significant one for those of us who joined the beautiful Arab American family, so thank you for that.

Susan: You're welcome. I promise you, Linda's a magnificent character. I know you'll love her.

Hannah: Do we have anyone else? Well, fine, I'll ask the Trump question. There's obviously a lot of pressure, and I feel like my eight-year-old son can't turn on a TV or look at the internet without something that questions his worth as a human being. Obviously, these are forces from beyond the white house, but certainly, a lot of rhetoric and racism, and bigotry has come from this administration.

I feel grateful that I even work at a place where we can say that openly because there has been this tension with journalists about, how do we describe this era? What has it been like to work through that? Do you try to keep those forces at bay as much as possible or incorporate them into your work? Is it inevitable that some of it creeps in?

Laila: I think it's inevitable that some creeps in. When I see how kids of color are navigating it, like you mentioned your eight-year-old son, when I see my kids or the refugee kids I work with and you realize how much pressure that puts on them. Every single day, the fear that somebody might do something to them in their school or wherever. I feel like it's changed the playing field in a way we haven't really seen here in decades. It's not like it's totally new, but certainly new for our lifetimes.

Hannah: In your work, have you responded in any way?

Laila: Kind of, maybe not overtly. Not quite as subversive as the chairs talking, but –

Susan: Middle fingers talking.

Laila: Exactly.

Hannah: When you hear a president who vilifies media, storytellers, journalists, immigrants, who sees a plot behind every criticism, you've seen where that leads in some cases. In Syria, at least, an extreme case of those autocratic tendencies gone amuck, are you worried by what you see here? Is it such a totally different context that it's apples and oranges, or is there cause for concern from someone who's seen these forces?

Osama: Before Trump, I was not worried at all. After Trump, yes, I'm worried. I never imagined this kind of treatment for immigrants will happen in America one day. I never imagined this will happen, beside many things. But still, I feel freedom despite that. There is no comparison between America or the Western world and the Middle East. Look what's happened in Syria for one person, for Bashar al-Assad. They destroy the whole country for one person. There is no comparison between America. There's still freedom. There's still tolerance.

Hannah: What's the role of the artist here in America to keep those impulses at bay, or to protect those rights that you say that you still are enjoying here?

Osama: My role as a writer, our goal as writers, artists is to make more awareness about democracy, about human rights. We need to keep talking about that. Keep writing about that. This is our role about human dignity, about love. I feel this is the problem not only in the States, not only in America. It looks like the whole world is going to hell now. This is my feeling, unfortunately. I used to be optimistic, but now I'm pessimistic. There's much more hatred in the world than before. I don't know why. As if we went back to middle ages, to dark ages, everywhere.

Hannah: Is your take as bleak or?

Susan: It's more bleak. No. I think I've been personally hurt by, after the election, the number of people that I personally know who ended up being Trump supporters. Chris Rock has this joke about how there's a new app you can download to know which of your friends is racist and it's called Facebook. God, is that true?

That November, I was looking at these posts by people that I know, that I have coffee with, that my kids play with their kids. I was like, "I have to say something to them." I'm like, "Hey, I saw your post and I have some thoughts about that because–" I said to a few of them, I said, "When you say that this is the right way to go and we're making America great again, I feel like that's an attack on me and my family and what I represent."

I lost some friendships, but that was okay. You can always purge. That's okay. That's what I'm saying, it's okay for people to know that their political views hurt you. That's how I felt about that, but it also made me think as well, that I don't think this hatred is new. I think it's always been there. It's just been quiet for a long time.

We've all been happy, we've been living the dream, that things are great, and things are getting better, but there's still that anger there. I think a lot of it is tied to class issues. I think we need to address that. Of course, what he's doing is blaming all those real issues of class and wealth disparity. He's blaming them on immigrants and things like that.

I think, as a writer, maybe my job is to just keep my voice at the table, to keep writing, keep representing, keep linking. I write a lot about not just Arab American immigrants but linking that experience to other immigrants and other communities, to white communities as well.

Maybe that's my role, is to just keep reminding everyone, my readers, that we really are sitting at the same table. Langston Hughes said, the kitchen table, we're sitting at this table together and we have to learn to see the beauty in each other.

Laila: Can I say one more thing?

Hannah: Please.

Laila: After Trump was elected, I thought I'm not an activist, but I have writing. There's something I have to do. I told myself, I'm going to write a story a month and I'll pinpoint where we are. The first story is the day of the election. The politics of it are in the background. They're all stories about women who have suffered some kind of trauma from various places. There's 12 stories, but what I found really interest –

Hannah: And you're on number –

Laila: I've finished them.

Hannah: Thought you were going to tell us how it ends.

Laila: What I found really interesting is, when I look at the first one, there was still this optimism, we can get through this. Again, these are not about politics. They're not about our situation. They're just people living their lives with that in the backdrop. By the last one, which is called *A Disappearance*, for me, it's helpful to see this is where we've come in 12 months. That's my little pinpoint effort.

Hannah: I'll make some time for just a couple more questions here.

Participant 2: The other half of the –

Hannah: We've started a –

[laughter]

Participant 2: No, my question is to all three of you authors. How has language played a role in your sense of exile? For example, I grew up in a Lebanese-American home, my parents spoke Arabic, but I responded in English. I understand Arabic, but when I speak Arabic in Lebanon, people think I'm making fun of the foreigner, trying to come back and speak, but then they realize, "Oh, he really can't speak Arabic very well. Let's dumb it down."

How has language played a role in a sense of exile, and being with family and the Arabic perhaps not understanding all the nuances? Osama, you seem to speak English incredibly well, but the command of it, and how does that play into your new writings?

Osama: I can tell you, people make fun of my English here too, sometimes, especially at the beginning. My thinking is still in Arabic, and to be honest with you, I'm still writing in Arabic. I'm trying to write in English, but it's still not easy for me. At the beginning, I thought English language is a very easy language. I was completely wrong. I think it's more difficult than Arabic language, so I'm practicing every day, so help me God.

[laughter]

Hannah: Is there anything else on language –

Susan: I was just going to tell you a funny story, you might find it funny. When my son was six, my friends are Bulgarian and they take their kids to a Bulgarian school, and our other friends are Chinese, and they take their kids to Chinese school. I was looking for an Arabic school, he was six at the time. I said to my six-year-old son, "Mama's going to find an Arabic school so you can go on Saturday and learn Arabic." He goes, "Why are we learning Arabic? We're Indian, aren't we?"

[laughter]

Susan: I said, "What?" He goes, "Yes, aren't we Indian?" I said, "No." I said, "Clearly, I'm not doing a very good job of translating our culture." I thought to myself, "Okay–" It really made me stop and think that when you're raising a family in this country, you just have to be more clear, and maybe just work harder. Those things that came across naturally from your parents to you. I was born here, so I have to just work harder to transmit those values, those cultural things.

I have to make [unintelligible] as well as mac and cheese, those kinds of things, to go back to food references, but it's just more work. It's more like a conscious effort to make the language part of your everyday life, just like you make the values and the traditions part of your everyday life.

Hannah: Right. I think we're actually out of time, but I would love to remind you that we will have books available for purchase and signing, and you can ask all the rest of your questions to these wonderful guests in just a few minutes in the main lobby, I think it is. Right? Yes, set up out there. I just want to say thanks again to all of you for coming, and to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for doing this, and of course, to the three of you.

Laila: And thanks to you.

Susan: Thank you.

Osama: Thank you.