Literary Conversations: Money

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

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You can also purchase our featured authors' books from Politics & Prose: *Black Buck* by Mateo Askaripour, *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* by Cherie Jones, *Sex and Vanity* by Kevin Kwan, The *Crazy Rich Asians* Trilogy by Kevin Kwan, and *Leave the World Behind* by Rumaan Alam.

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello everyone. I am Gwydion Suilebhan, PEN/Faulkner's Executive Director. Thank you so much for joining us tonight for Money, which should be a spectacular conversation about a subject I know we're all thinking about, perhaps more so in the last two years than ever before.

I want to tell you a little bit about PEN/Faulkner. We believe that the arts can help create an equitable, just, and flourishing world. Our role is to provide rich literary experiences for as many people as we can. You may know us for giving out big awards like the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction or for holding programs like we're having tonight, but a very large part of what we do is education. We bring free books, visits from authors, and writing instruction into low-income schools in DC. Our goal is to create learning environments where students can relate to the books they read and find inspiration in the lives of the authors they meet and develop their own writing skills and their own voices.

Those of you who donated to join us here tonight have already helped make that possible and I am very grateful, especially given that we're all here to talk tonight about money. If you haven't contributed yet and you have the means in this difficult time, I sincerely hope that you will. You can use the link that's about to appear in the chat to do that, and really even $10 or $15 gets us started and makes a difference for a young person. Thank you so much.

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

Now, for tonight's program, we are very lucky to be joined tonight by four very impressive people. Mateo Askaripour's work aims to empower people of color to seize opportunities for advancement no matter the obstacle. He was chosen as one of Entertainment Weekly's 10 rising stars to make waves in 2021, as well as a 2018 Rhode Island Writers Colony writer-in-residence. His writing has appeared in Entrepreneur, Lit Hub, Catapult, and elsewhere. His debut novel, *Black Buck*, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller and a Read With Jenna Today Show book club pick. He lives in Brooklyn. You can follow him on Instagram and Twitter.

Cherie Jones was born in 1974. She received an LL.B degree from the University of the West Indies, Barbados, in 1995, a Legal Education Certificate from the Hugh Wooding Law School, St. Augustine, Trinidad in 1997, and was admitted to the Bar in Barbados in October 1997. Cherie won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 1999. She won both the Archie Markham Award and the AM Heath Prize at Sheffield Hallam in the UK. A collection of interconnected stories set in a

different small community in Barbados won a third prize at the Frank Collymore Endowment Awards in 2016. She still works as a lawyer, in addition to her writing.

Kevin Kwan is the author of *Crazy Rich Asians*, the international best-selling novel that's been translated into more than 30 languages. Its sequel, *China Rich Girlfriend*, was released in 2015, and *Rich People Problems*, the final book in the trilogy, followed in 2017. For several weeks in 2018, the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy commanded the top three positions in *The New York Times* bestseller list, an almost unprecedented single-author trifecta. The film adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* became Hollywood's highest-grossing romantic comedy in more than a decade. In 2018, Kevin was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Last but not least, our moderator, Rumaan Alam is the author of the novels *Rich and Pretty*, *That Kind of Mother*, and *Leave the World Behind*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Bookforum*, and *The New Republic*, where he is a contributing editor. He studied writing at Oberlin College and lives in New York with his family. Welcome to all of you, and thank you for joining us.

Rumaan Alam: Thank you so much. Thank you, Gwydion, and thank you to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. It's really nice to hear a little bit about what the Foundation's work does as we gather here tonight to talk about something that I have always been told is not a subject for polite conversation, which is money. I guess we should prepare for an impolite evening. I'm going to ask the three writers who are joining me tonight about their relationships to money as a subject and about a host of other things I'm really curious to talk to them [about]. I think we should just dive right in.

Now, before we begin, I think it's useful to talk about the books under discussion, which are Mateo's novel, *Black Buck*. I was going to hold them up to the camera. I don't know why, I have this weird Price is Right instinct to hold them up, so I will. Mateo's book *Black Buck*, Cherie's book *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*, and Kevin's book *Sex and Vanity*. Kevin's book has such a shiny cover that it's distorting the light but you get the picture, you get the picture.

I said to these guys before we started that I feel like it's a particular pain point for a writer to have to summarize a book that they spent months, if not years, of their life working on. You can't cram it into a 30-second pitch and so I volunteered to do that on their behalf. I'm going to give you the sales pitch on these individual books, and then I'm going to ask each of the writers to read briefly from the book. I'm going to proceed the only way that I know how, which is through the alphabet, so we're going to start with *Black Buck*.

Black Buck is the story – I'm laughing because it is not even the book that I wrote and it's still hard for me to summarize but I'm going to give it a shot. *Black Buck* is the story of Darren who is a born salesman who finds himself in what his family and friends consider a dead-end job for someone of his skills. He's managing a Starbucks and he has this chance encounter that leads him to a gig at a startup. It's a book about Darren's great success in the world of business but it's also a book about the crisis of conscience that propels him to become a double agent of American capitalism. Mateo, I hope that pitch was okay.

Mateo Askaripour: It sounded great.

Rumaan: I would love [it] if you would read for us a bit.

Mateo: Yes, thank you, Rumaan. Thank you, Cherie, Kevin, and everyone else who has joined us today and PEN/Faulkner for hosting. I'm reading from the middle of the book. All you really need to know is that the company, the startup, as Rumaan said, that Darren, who is renamed as Buck, is working at is going under and there's an opportunity to save it. Buck makes one fateful phone call and this is towards the end of the conversation with that individual named Barry D, a big media maven. All right.

Mateo reading from *Black Buck*:

"What else do you want?"

He laughed again. This time deeper, longer, and slower. "I want you, my man. I want you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that every second you're not at Sumwun you work for me."

My hands were shaking. I couldn't believe what was happening. I was ready for him to yell, "PSYCH" before hanging up. But I had to keep going, just in case. "And what does working for you entail?"

"Oh, a lot of things. Helping me with investments. Running errands. Putting some of your raw potential to proper use. If you make me money, I'll make you money, but it'll come at a price. And I'm not talking a measly five hundred grand. Doing this deal, Buck, the deal I'm bringing to the table, means I own you."

I didn't know Barry aside from his reputation as an energetic, ruthless, and pompous businessman, which made the prospect of being "owned" by him as appealing as chewing nails. But when I looked at Rhett, I already knew what I'd have to do. He gave me the opportunity I'd always wanted but didn't know I needed; despite managing hundreds of employees, he made me feel as if I were the only person in the world when he looked at me, and I couldn't let that go, especially now, when I'd lost everyone who had ever meant anything to me.

"Okay, Barry," I said. "We have a deal."

"And what does having a deal mean, Buck? I want to hear you say it."

I took a deep breath and looked around the room. Everyone stared at me, nodding. Back during Hell Week, they went to bat for me when I needed it most, and I needed to do the same for them. I truly believed in this company, so I had to give myself to it, to do whatever it took to save it.

Reader –

Mateo: This is breaking the fourth wall [in a] direct address to the reader.

Mateo reading from *Black Buck*:

Reader: In the same way there's no such thing as a halfway crook, there's no such thing as a halfway success. In sales and life, you're either all in or you're not. And if you're not, then step the fuck aside before you get run over by someone who is.

I closed my eyes and gripped the receiver tighter. "It means you own me, Barry. I'm yours."

Mateo: Thank you.

Rumaan: That gives us a good taste of how *Black Buck* functions. We're going to hold on that for a minute and we're going to talk about *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*, which has got to be one of the most arresting titles for a novel I've ever heard. It's really such a good title. The title of this novel is the punch line or the moral of a cautionary story that's delivered from grandmother to granddaughter. The granddaughter is a girl named Lala, and by nature, she's destined to disobey the warning in her grandmother's story. The warning is, don't be curious because you could lose a limb and then how will you sweep your house? Lala's determined to test the limits of how to live and how to live curiously on her own terms. I'm going to ask Cherie to read a little bit from her beautiful book.

Cherie Jones: Thank you. Thanks very much. It's a real pleasure to be here. I'm going to read from Chapter 20, which is just past midway through the book. It takes place – it's from a scene where Lala is being questioned by a policeman about a crime that takes place earlier in the novel.

Cherie reading from *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*:

20th August 1984.

If we were to look for Lala, and if we were to find her on the flank of Baxter's Beach, knuckle-deep in the hair of a stranger, if we were to walk up to her and ask her whether she knows the frowsy beach bum, the one at whom are island women chupse, the one the memory of whom makes some tourist women breathe faster, we would notice first how she keeps her gaze on the head in front of her when she queries, *Who?* as if she is deliberately avoiding our eyes. Her fingers would not slow down, not then, they would keep weaving hair at a speed that would seem incapable of measurement: *overunderoverunderoverunderover…*

We might describe Robert Parris (also known as "Tone") first in physical terms, because his form – rusty, shoulder-length locks, average height, slim build, sinewy and strong – is what is first obvious to anyone who looks at him. We would explain that we're talking about the one whose toenails are washed white as surf, whose skin is salted with the fine white dust of a living made on the beach. We would explain that the hair on his head and hands has become the gold of the sun, so that, like the sun, we would not see it if we look at him straight on.

When Lala still feigns ignorance of his acquaintance, we could refer to his quirks – the shark tooth necklace he wears around his neck and kisses before he ventures into the water, the way he slaps the surface of the sea with his Jet Ski so that the older swimmers startle and the younger ones spit obscenities, the tendency he has to take the unruly locks at the crown of his head and squeeze them to get rid of the saltwater while bent over at the waist.

And because Robert Parris is a subject that must be avoided at all costs, we would hear Lala again say *Who?* even as her fingers slow their speed on the hair in front of her. (*Over. Under. Over. Under.*

Over. Stop. Over.) And it is only after she realizes that we will keep asking until she answers – after we have described him in such a way that it would be more suspicious if she said she does not know him – that we would find the small brittle smile of recognition. *Oh*, Tone, Lala would say, *Yes – yes, I know him*. And her hands would start to trip over themselves, to drop the silken strands of flaxen hair before her so that she will have to start the cornrow all over again. *(Over. Stop. Over. Under. Stop. Over. Stop. Under. Overunderoverunderoverunder. Stop.)*

If we were to push further, to ask how she knows him, her eyes would fall from the hair in which she has tangled her fingers and land on her feet where a fly would be broaching the sticky-sweet memory of a drop of sno-cone dried on her toe. And her eyes would stay there while we reassure the tourist between Lala's legs. This tourist would now be closing her book, gathering her towel, saying she can come back when we're done, hesitating with a half-done head when we tell her it is okay, she can stay, this will only take a few minutes.

Perhaps prior to the death of her baby, Lala's smile would have widened and her *Why you want to know?* would not have led to more probing while she plaited cornrows with such tenderness that her client would have started to doze off, her hair now being done in the land of dreams.

Before the death of the baby, we might have said we were asking because we have seen the way he looks at her when he lands on the beach with a roar of the Jet Ski and the water only just rejoining behind him. Had we not been aware that she was wedded to another man, we might have told her, we would have taken this Tone for her husband. Were we not aware that this Tone sells his body to the tourist women on the beach, we would believe that this body is hers, so studiously does she avoid devouring it with her eyes in the way her client cannot help but do.

Cherie: Thank you.

Rumaan: Thank you. I very, very rarely look at a book's jacket copy. I know that there are editors [who] spend a lot of time laboring on that but I like to dive into a book without knowing too much about it, and so I was pretty well into Kevin Kwan's *Sex and Vanity* before it occurred to me that there was something familiar about it. I was like, wait a minute, a girl being accompanied by a fussy cousin and they're in Italy. What is this making me think of? Then, of course, I looked at the jacket copy and I was like, oh, of course, Kevin is writing a kind of homage or riff on E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*.

Like that book, this is a comedy of manners. It's a book about love and freedom and the development of the self but it's not just a retread of a story that you think you know, at least I didn't find it to be that at all. Kevin, I wonder if you'll read for us a little bit from this book.

Kevin Kwan: Happily, and it's really such a pleasure to be here with all of you today. It's been a while since I've actually read from this book, so I might be a bit rusty. Let me just give a very quick setup. In this little passage, we're really in the mind of the heroine of the book, Lucie Tang Churchill. She is a rather tangled mess. She's torn between two men, one that she's engaged to and the other one that she's just irresistibly drawn to. We're in her head here as she's assessing what to do, so I will begin.

Kevin reading from *Sex and Vanity*:

George was the polar opposite of the kind of guys she liked. He didn't grow up in New York. He wasn't suave and sophisticated. He didn't dress properly. He didn't in any way resemble Cary Elwes in *The Princess Bride*. He was nothing like the husband she had always envisioned for herself. He had driven her crazy and done nothing but mess up her life and mess with her head since the moment she had first set eyes on him in the lunchroom of the Bertolucci, and the one thing she hated more than anything was messy. Her life, her image, her whole being up till this point, had been a study in perfection. She had gone to Brearley and had always been the popular girl, Lucie Tang Churchill, the cool half-Asian girl. She had graduated from Brown with honors. She had landed her dream job with the coolest company in town, and she was about to marry a dashing, erudite gentleman whom even Esquire proclaimed "The Most Desired Dude on the Planet." They would live in an exquisitely original townhouse in the West Village, summer in East Hampton, and maybe even get a place in Provence. They would both serve on the boards of the Brooklyn Museum and PS1 and maybe even the Dia. They would, in precisely four and a half years, start to have beautiful, gifted children (a boy, then a girl) who would attend Saint Bernard's and Brearley, followed by Harvard or Brown or Bard—actually, no, not Bard, Brearley girls didn't go to Bard—and be adored by everyone, adored by Granny, adored by all the Churchills. And if all went as planned, she would see Cecil and her children's names appear alongside hers in *The Social Register*, and it would be the happiest day of Cecil's life. There was no way in hell she was going to let George ruin this magnificent life she had planned out for herself since she was eight years old. All the happiness in her future, her family's future, her children's future, depended on the removal of George Zao from her life.

Rumaan: Well, you guys have to read the book to understand, to figure out what's going to actually happen to Lucie. Before I dive into the many questions that I prepared for these guys, I wanted to note that we'll take audience questions and you should ask them. I think at this point in American history, most of us have used Zoom, but there's a Q&A button at the bottom of your screen, you can type your question in there and I'll get to those after I give these guys the third degree to satisfy my own curiosity.

These are three very different writers and three very different books, but the reason that I think we're here tonight, the three of you are here tonight, is because there are these resonances across the work and I would love to tease some of them out. As the name of this conversation suggests, money [is] principle in this conversation. Mateo, I wonder if you could answer the extent to which money as a subject, whatever that means to you, was your subject or whether it was a way of talking about something else entirely in *Black Buck*.

Mateo: Yes. It's hard to imagine that this book would exist without money. It's hard for me to even think of any work that would exist without money having an effect on it in some way or another. Darren's working at Starbucks and I really like how you phrase that it's a "dead-end" job to his family and friends because for me, when people ask, why did you portray this young man who was valedictorian of one of the top public schools in America, working at Starbucks, wasting his potential? I say, well that calls into question, what is success in this nation or in this world?

We see the cost that he has to pay when he begins to chase another person's definition of success defined by this suave, good-looking white CEO, Rhett Daniels. Darren's pursuit of this version of success I will say, and it's hard for me to speak for the character but I believe it's not driven by money. It's more so driven by the idea of achieving the potential that those who love him

unconditionally believe that he has, and then proving all of these white people that work in this startup that he can outwork them. Money is a by-product but we see the way that it changes him.

Myself – when I was younger, I was 23, 24 working at a startup myself, managing 30 people, making over six figures. I'd never made that much money in my life and I'm not going to say that the money changed me but things are different when you don't have to ask yourself, all right, am I going to spend $5 or $10 on lunch, versus never even caring. I think that it does have an effect on your psyche.

In this narrative, I'm showing the different ways that money has an unconscious or conscious impact on people's lives. Showing how, oftentimes, people will regard an individual as an employee rather than a person and there's a difference, and that people in these organizations will oftentimes claim that they're looking to change the world or hold on to some weird notion of manifest destiny in the 21st century of "we must expand, we must colonize, we must disrupt," when in fact, they're really just looking to put profits over people in order to achieve some weirdly erotic end, [chuckles] that might result in a – like, a million dollars or a billion dollars or calling your organization a unicorn, which is another weird term that they have in the startup world. Those were some of the motivations behind the narrative and how I believe money plays into it.

Rumaan: I think, Kevin, you're a writer in the cultural imagination who's so closely associated with money as a subject. For God's sakes, *Crazy Rich Asians*, I don't really think you have to say much more than that, but I suspect that your project as a novelist isn't exactly what it might seem or what the title *Crazy Rich Asians* or even *Sex and Vanity*, what it might suggest. I'm wondering whether you think money, across that trilogy and across this new book, is your subject or if it's a tool for – or like a trick for talking about something else.

Kevin: I think it's a bit of both. Money is so central and it's so dominant in the lives of all the people I write about. First of all, in the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy, you're looking at these different concentric circles of monied families and what money does to them, both good and bad. Then in *Sex and Vanity*, I think we enter even more complex territory there. Because here you have all these different overlapping classes. You have Lucie who is, on her father's side, descendant from a very blue blood, waspy, New York power lead family. Then, on her mother's side, just a very average middle-class Asian-American family. Then, she's marrying Cecil who comes from the new billionaire class.

There's all these overlapping status plays that happen and I really wanted to examine that and how those motivate the characters, how it motivates her when she's in her mind trying to assess what she should do.

Rumaan: Mateo spoke of the tension between money and one's sense of self. Kevin, you're talking about this tension between money and class identity which is like a different but interrelated thing. Cherie, your characters in your novel have a different relationship than those in *Black Buck* or *Sex and Vanity* to money because we're meeting people who are poor principally. We're meeting them in a place that they refer to throughout the book as paradise. We're seeing a paradise that belongs to the wealthy English white but is inhabited by the Black West Indian with significantly less money and therefore power. I wonder if you could talk about the extent to which that particular tension was part of the subject of your book?

Cherie: I think it definitely is a big part of what the book is about. One of the characters early on in the book, Mira Whalen's mother, makes a comment that the two extremes of possession, deprivation and deluge, are especially crippling to the soul, and a lot of this novel is about what life is like when you live in the postcard and are unable to participate in the luxury of it. We have some financially deprived, very difficult circumstances – our main protagonist and her husband and they do all sorts of things just to be able to survive.

We meet male prostitutes, we meet female prostitutes. Our protagonist braids hair for tourists on the beach and they eke out a living doing various things just to survive. There's this battle for survival in the face of some really wealthy tourists who live in these huge mansions on the beach. There's this definite clash of those two worlds. In reality, that is exactly what happens on the beach. All aspects of society in the Caribbean tend to meet on the beach. The book really is about what life is like for people like Lala and Adan of all of this luxury that they're unable to participate in.

Rumaan: In the section that Cherie read, we heard that a police officer had arrived to interrogate Lala in this crime, the death of her child, and Lala's braiding hair, and she's speaking, she's bodily interacting with a white tourist. She's speaking of a friend, Tone, who works as a prostitute, who sleeps with older women who have traveled to the island.

In *Sex and Vanity*, there's a scene where Lucie and Cecil, her fiance, are having this very funny sex play, this very funny Downton Abbey-themed erotic play. Cecil touches his fiance's body and says you're mine, which is a thing that people say, and it is a romantic and charged thing. Inside the context of a book which establishes all of Cecil's material interests and possessions, it feels slightly different. It feels slightly jarring and feels like it does not bode well for that particular relationship.

In Mateo's book, as he mentioned, which I should have clarified at the outset, Darren is known throughout the novel as Buck. Now, there's a funny triple meaning there because he's been found at Starbucks and he's in service of a startup who went to accrue bucks. Of course, the thing that is pressing on my mind is the notion of Black masculinity as sexual service. Even in the section that we heard Mateo read, you're hearing him say to this billionaire who's about to bail out his company, "I'm yours. I belong to you."

It hadn't occurred to me until I heard you and Cherie read those sections. I was like, oh, there is something very interesting about the relationship between money as an idea of currency or whatever, and the body, and all three of you are writing about the body. One of you, talk to me about that particular thing. Maybe, Mateo, you should explain to me how you landed on – the moment where you were like, "Oh, his name should be Buck." Did the book coalesce or did you know that going in?

Mateo: Oh man. We're opening up a can of worms, so many different places to go here. It's like, I knew that he was always going to be referred to as Buck and I knew about the triple or four-pronged entendre, but for me – and there are some people, especially some older Black folk that are like, "*Black Buck*? What is that?" They're triggered, and I didn't pick the title to provoke, actually. For me, it's a reclamation of sorts because Darren, he is not the unruly, untameable, enslaved Black male that the white enslavers would refer to, is going to burn down the plantation, steal the women, steal the pigs, and all that great stuff, but he is burning down what these

organizations symbolize and stand for, at least for a moment in time. Who knows what happens after the book?

I'm so happy that you brought up ownership and you also referred to Kevin's book and the role play, that sounds wild. This might be an extreme perspective, but I do believe that if someone is employed by an organization, that they are in part owned by that organization by virtue of the fact that they are giving them maybe eight hours, maybe nine hours, maybe 10 hours in the office or in the virtual office, and no one's tracking the time that you're thinking about your job that you're not getting paid for. You're giving them time that you will never get back, ever. What they are giving you is money in return. Maybe there are intangibles.

What we see in my book and what many people have probably seen in their own organizations, especially if you've worked in a start-up, is that there was such a fine line between cult and culture, and there was a reason that all of these people get roped in who willingly or unwillingly give their bodies up to these organizations and time that they're never going to get back. I'm just grateful that you brought up ownership because it is something that is at the heart of this novel and in the part that I read, it's very on the nose and blatant, but I think that what is oftentimes more dangerous is the ways that you allow people to own you without knowing and thinking that you're free.

Ruman: Cherie, in your book, as I said, you write about the body. We heard that section where Lala's fingers are in someone else's hair but there's a lot of really great – I'm thinking of – there's a scene early in the book where Lala's about to be born or Lala is about to give birth, excuse me. Then there's also an extraordinary moment, to Mateo's point, where she's tagging along as her grandmother cleans the house.

What the grandmother says to her is, if you have to go to the bathroom, you can't go number two. It's like you can't actually have a body. You can't exist in your unruly Black body within this home that belongs to white people, so I wonder, Cherie, if you could talk a little bit about the way you were exploring that idea of ownership or the body in this work.

Cherie: For me, I mean the body, I think and its ownership were really important in this novel, especially as it relates to the women in the novel. At its most basic, even when you have nothing, once you are alive, you have your body, you inhabit your body. In this particular space, that's exactly what some of the characters choose to use to negotiate to try to get all of the circumstances that they find themselves in.

That is especially true, not only true for women, but it is a fact of life for the women in the novel. Generally speaking, that's how many of them try to transcend the circumstances in which they find themselves. What is also interesting about that is that, while in some instances, for example, with the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba is a prostitute and uses her body to get money, and there seems to be a certain element of power to that, a certain level of agency in terms of how she negotiates her body in getting what she wants.

Later on in the novel, the lie in that is when we look at it within the context of the larger system and society. She benefits from the protection of a member of the police force who then exercises a level of dominion all over her body. There's a question of the extent to which that body is truly hers within the context of this society in which she lives. There are lots of, I would say, questions for me

based on things that I've observed in the Caribbean and in Barbados, growing up as a female, as a Black female, that I think came out in this book as it relates to the level of agency women have over their bodies, how bodies are used to transcend circumstances, and the extent to which we're constrained by society's expectations and norms in terms of how we can use that body within particular contexts.

Rumaan: There's an unlikely, I think, almost resonance with *Sex and Vanity* here, because where Cherie is writing about people who still have materially nothing, Kevin is writing about people who have materially everything, but they find themselves similarly constrained. I don't want to spoil what actually happens in the romance and the plot of the novel, but there was a point at which I was like – I described this before, that Lucie and Cecil are having this moment, this intimate moment and it becomes this moment of ownership. Then I was like, oh God, isn't marriage just like a business deal? Do I not believe in romantic marriage? Then I want to ask you, Kevin, is marriage just a business deal, or do we believe in romantic marriage?

Kevin: [chuckles] Wow. I think both can exist at the same time in the reality of this book, because yes, we have Lucie who is a romantic, who wants to believe in romance and falling in love with the right person, but at the same time, she finds herself in a situation where it is transactional in many ways. I think that the scene that you mentioned highlights the fact that she's valued by Cecil who, let's just say it, is just a materialistic asshole, right?

He lives for his image, he lives for status and he sees her as the ultimate status object, really. He fetishizes her in this way, and you can see that in their role play and in so many aspects of their relationship, in his need to Instagram every moment they spend together. That's his currency. That is what gives him the cred. It's not just about the money for him. On her end, however, she's grown up biracial, she is mixed race. She has always felt this inferiority because of that with her very waspy blue blood relatives. She feels that the trade-off for her is, I got to marry a billionaire. I have to do better than even my parents, my grandparents. I have to marry one of the richest men in the world in order to gain respectability with my own family. Yes, I think there's a mixture of the complexities of what is transactional and what is ideology.

Rumaan: Yes, and what's possible for a woman versus what's possible for a man, which is something that your book explores quite a bit actually. I think the book is generally more interested in its women than in its men. Again, you're writing about people who have everything materially, but their options are still almost as circumscribed by virtue of their sex as the women that Cherie's writing about, which is a really interesting resonance.

Kevin: Absolutely. I think some things just don't even change centuries later.

Rumaan: Yes. I want to switch gears from talking about money as currency to talk a little bit about debt, artistic debt in particular. Obviously, I mentioned that Kevin's book is indebted to Forster or dancing on top of *A Room with a View*, but I wonder if you could all talk about influence and artistic debt, and the writers who you feel connected to, and the writers who you felt this work has some kinship to. I know it can be scary to say, I was inspired by this person, and I don't mean like a direct correlation, but the constellation or there's a family tree that birthed this work.

I'm also really curious, just as a technical matter, whether when you are all working on a novel, whether you're reading material related to that, or whether you're reading something entirely different. Cherie, why don't you start?

Cherie: Sure. I'd be happy to. The last question first, when I am writing and really deep into a particular project, I tend not to read a lot of fiction at that point in time. I'll read nonfiction but, generally speaking, fiction, no, not while I'm working hard on something. The writers that influence me, Toni Morrison, Earl Lovelace, Olive Senior. Olive Senior and Earl Lovelace would be Caribbean authors. Gosh, there are so many.

Rumaan: I know. This is a hard question to answer. I know.

[laughter]

Cherie: Yes. There's so many who would have influenced me at one point or another. I think one of the things that I really, really appreciated about Earl Lovelace is especially *The Wine of Astonishment*. I remember reading that book when I was at what we call secondary school. You'd say high school, I guess. That book really changed my life. I don't think I ever looked at a villain the same again, after *The Wine of Astonishment*. There was a character in that book who went from being the star boy of the community to the most feared, most awful person within that same community.

Lovelace just painted this character with such empathy, and just managed to show him as the complex human being that he was. I was quite young, but prior to that point, I think I'd probably read *Angels and Demons* and *Never the Twain Shall Meet*. I think after that, I developed a real appreciation for complexity in humans, and therefore, in characters. I was just never the same after reading *The Wine of Astonishment*. Earl Lovelace, yes, very big inspiration. I can think of others. Timothy Callender, I mentioned [unintelligible], Jamaica Kincaid, Alice Walker, Claude McKay. There's so many. So many, but –

Rumaan: Yes, like I said, this is the hardest question I'm going to ask you.

Cherie: Yes.

Rumaan: It'll be much simpler after this. Kevin, obviously, Forster, I wonder if actually you could talk a little bit about *A Room with a View* specifically, but I'd be curious to know, [coughs] what else was in your family tree with respect to *Sex and Vanity*?

Kevin: Yes. This book has often been called a homage to *A Room with a View*. In some ways, it very much is. I really saw it as a departure point. For me, E. M. Forster has been one of these authors that is able to look at the privileged classes in such a nuanced, intimate way. He gives you an unexpected entry point into the lives of these people. That, to me, ends up being much richer than a lot of other people writing in the style that he wrote in. Definitely, he was, of course, the first and foremost inspiration, but there have been so many others, I think, that I would say helped influence this book that I created.

Tom Wolfe, for example, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Dominick Dunne, Edith Wharton, Evelyn Waugh. There are these amazing writers who were so biting in their satire that I've always admired that I

think I could draw influence from when I created this book. As much as an homage to *A Room with a View* is, this is also my satire of New York City, and my years living in New York.

Rumaan: Mateo, what about you?

Mateo: Yes. When I'm writing, I'm always reading, but I try not to read anything too closely related to the subject at hand. I don't want to copy, or as we say, bite. I'm not trying to bite off of them. I try to come up with ideas that are original, even though, of course, originality could just be a synthesis between my own experiences and things that I've heard or seen in the past, but when it comes to influences, I'll say that if anyone's ever read *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty, then you could probably feel the influence. I read *The Sellout* before I began writing *Black Buck*.

I said, "Holy shit, this is crazy, and won a prestigious award?" I said, "Man, he–" I felt as though he was giving me permission to just go hard, and not hold back. I remember my first instance of running into the writer, Jason Reynolds, Rumaan actually profiled him for *The New Yorker*. Jason became like a big brother to me. The first time I met him, he's published millions of books, middle grade, young adult, and so forth. I ran into him at McNally Jackson on Prince Street, and me, young writer, no agent, no book deal. I said, "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

Jason, being so cool, was like, "Yeah, man, yeah." Then I said, "All right, I'm going to ask him some questions." I said, "Have you read *The Sellout*?" He said, "Yes, definitely." I said, "Man, I'm trying to write something like that. Just like something biting, something hard, and sharp, and something real, though." I remember he just took a sip of his coffee and he said, "Yeah, but you got to be good enough. If you're going to do that, you got to be good enough." That's definitely something that I had in mind while I was writing *Black Buck*, to not just vomit on the page for a couple of 100 pages, but to make it something that I'd be proud of, and that would be coherent.

The Sellout was an influence. Definitely, a lot of other writers that Jason's introduced me to after meeting him and spending some time with him. People in the Black canon that not all of us hear about or learn about in high school. So, not just Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and maybe if you're lucky, Zora Neale Hurston, but John A. Williams, who wrote *The Angry Ones* and *The Man Who Cried I Am*. When I read *The Angry Ones*, I realized that I was writing part of a larger and longer tradition about Black people who have been the only one or one of the few in environments. Ann Petry in *The Street*. Chester Himes in *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Gayl Jones in *Corregidora*.

All of these books that were always [unintelligible] and that reminded me or taught me that I wasn't alone. That was inspiring for me to forge ahead and to write the book that I wanted, to resonate with people in the way that I wanted it to. I'll also say that there are contemporary writers. Nafissa Thompson-Spires in *Heads of the Colored People. Black Buck*, I'm not going to call it just a one-to-one satire, even though people love to call it that. There are satirical and absurdist elements even though, honestly, I could picture all this shit happening despite –

Through Nafissa's work, and some of her essays, and befriending her, I began to learn about rules of satire, or at least typical conventions. That was helpful in crafting the book. I'll say, what else helped was sales manuals. When I got into the world of sales, these guys that I worked for handed

me this book called the *Little Red Book of Selling* and *The Sales Bible* by a man named Jeffrey Gitomer. It was just like no nonsense, with cloth covered covers and glossy pages.

It's like this guy was screaming at you nonstop, "You got to do this, you got to do that." I had also read *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* by Mohsin Hamid. Then I had read, while I was revising *Black Buck*, *The Residue Years* by Mitchell S. Jackson. Those three sources coalesced when I was working on the third or fourth draft of the book into saying, "I want this to not just be an engaging narrative, but to also double as a sales manual."

From the author's note, I'm breaking the fourth wall, why don't I be very conspicuous about it and have direct addresses to the reader that are bolded and set apart from the other parts of the paragraphs on the page so that people can see that these are life lessons disguised as a sales lesson, and if they pay attention, not just to Darren's story, but to these maxims or pieces of advice that they might be able to walk away with basic sales proficiency, not to just walk in and get a job at a startup, even though I think that it could help, but to more so advocate for themselves and those that they love.

The inspirations, as we all know, run deep. There's rappers, there's Nina Simone, Oprah Winfrey, people like that. People that were incredible at their craft, but lived beyond what they did, and paid attention to who they were, and standing for what they believed in. That sustained me throughout the writing of the book for sure.

Rumaan: I always love hearing anyone talk about *The Sellout*. *The Sellout*, for anyone who is watching who has not read it, is one of the best American novels of the last century. There's really no question. It's an extraordinary, extraordinary piece of work. It is the kind of work that I think, as you are saying, makes a younger writer feel like they have permission. You're just like, "You can't believe–" As Jayson said, yes, you have to be a genius to accomplish what Paul Beatty did, but that you could do that is extraordinary. Mateo, you used the word satire and absurdity because Kevin used that word as well.

I wanted to ask all three of you, Cherie, when you're writing about very serious material about sexual violence, about sexual – There's so much in this book. There's sexual violence, there's trauma, there's the loss of a child, there's guilt. I mean, there's a lot of material happening. Kevin, you're writing about something that comparably feels like frivolity, but you're doing it with a particular perspective, to make a point about contemporary society.

Mateo, as you said, you're working in what people have called a more satiric register. Although interestingly, I think Paul Beatty also rejects the word satire when it's applied to his work. How does one accomplish writing about the serious, as Cherie is doing, or actually as all of you are doing, without also being boring, and dour, and too serious to yourself? How do you manage that tension? Anyone of you, please, answer this question. Explain this to me so that I know how to do it.

Cherie: Wow.

[laughter]

Cherie: I don't know, Rumaan, this seems like a pretty tough one. I don't know. You said we'd passed the worst –

Rumaan: I did. I did tell you that.

[laughter]

Cherie: How to write about serious things without being dour. There isn't a lot of humor in my book. Most things aren't treated in a particularly light way. I think there is a subtlety in terms of how it's written, but the subject matter is weighty subject matter. For me, I was very conscious of that while writing the book. At points it was hard for me to actually write it. It was wrenching. I had to put it down and come back to it just because I found it so tough to get through.

For me, there was no gimmick to it, there was no apology, there was no attempt to make it more palatable for a reader or for anybody else. I just felt like this was the story, and what was important to me was having the reader, anybody who read this story had to come into that room willingly, sit down, start to understand the horror of what was happening, and then recognize the door is locked, you can't get back out, but there is an investment in trying to understand how this story ends. It's like, so compelling you can't look away.

I can't say that I did anything or I set out consciously to make it easier or more palatable. There was a little bit of balance. I remember at one point one of my editors saying to me, "Gosh, Cherie, this is so heavy. For God's sake, you're on a beach in Barbados. Isn't there anything beautiful? Isn't the sunset nice to look at?" [laughs] We did talk about some of the descriptions because I think the coconut trees that are always on the postcards. It's like you put the hammock in between, you lay down and lounge.

In my book, the centipedes live there, and they throw [unintelligible] missiles, and people have to try to dodge them, and it's all death and horror. Maybe I wasn't so good at balancing it, or trying to make it easier for anybody, but, to me, that –

Rumaan: I think that's your answer. It's that you do it directly. You do it by – There's a scene early in the book where she's in the hospital waiting room, and she goes into the bathroom and there's no toilet paper in the bathroom. You have to see the nurse get the toilet paper beforehand. It looks so squarely at what is being described in a way that feels like the only way you can write about something that's base or ugly or is so human.

The language is lovely, but you're not hiding behind the language, you're looking directly at the thing. Again, the register in Kevin's book and Mateo's book is so different. I'm not sure whether satire is the right word for either of those books, but I'd be curious to hear, Kevin, how do you write about people with affection, but also with a scalpel? How do you manage that balance?

Kevin: One of the writers I've always been extremely influenced by is Joan Didion. She's perhaps my favorite author. There is this devastating surgical nature to her work. I feel like in many ways, I'm doing the same thing, but because the lens is focused on a certain set of people, and what they're doing, and what I choose to look at in that moment in these worlds, there is an absurdism I find, that people think is funny. I don't think I'm funny and my books, the quotes are "hilarious, laugh out loud."

Rumaan: You don't think you're funny? Kevin, I find that very surprising. You're so funny.

Kevin: Seriously, I don't think I'm funny at all. When I first set out to write, originally, The *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy, it was meant to be a very incisive angry look, to me, just how obscene the level of wealth was that I was observing in contemporary Asia. Really, the gulf between the haves and the have-nots was so exponentialized. I couldn't quite imagine it until the last couple of years living in this country.

I went into it with this notion of like, "Okay, this is going to be a take down of these people." Somehow, what came out was *Crazy Rich Asians*. I'm not really doing a very good job of really explaining my process. I guess it's a crazy one, in a way, because I'm trying to just describe situations and tell the truth. Somehow along the line of that, the truth emerges in its strange way and its strange form.

Rumaan: Well, I think the answer is that the truth is so discomforting to people that they laugh, because they don't know what else to do, because the notion of people possessing this kind of immoral wealth, or this kind of blinkered view of reality itself is so disturbing to the 99.99% of us who are not that person, that we don't know what to do but laugh. Mateo, do you embrace or reject? You said people talk about *Black Buck* as satire in a way that suggests to me that you're not wholly comfortable with that. What do you think of that label affixed to this work?

Mateo: I'm fine with it because it's not coming out of my mouth. People can call it whatever they want. Satire, trash, great book, whatever. It's on them, as long as they read it and make it to the end. It is astounding, as you said, Rumaan, that Kevin, you don't think you're funny. Do you think your book is funny?

Kevin: Do I think my book is funny?

Mateo: Yes. Do you think your book is funny?

Kevin: I think there's definitely parts of it that are funny. Yes.

Mateo: Yes, because I was laughing –

Kevin: Inadvertently.

Mateo: When you were reading, I was laughing so hard just because it felt, as you said, so true. That there are these people on the Upper West Side or wherever, you know, around the world, in Iowa, probably, that are just so rich. They're obsessed with, like, "No, she's not going to go to Bard. She can't go to Bard." It's comical because it's true, and because, from my perspective, it's absurd, even though I understand where they're coming from. Just from your short excerpt, I understood where she was coming from and why she would think that way.

Even if it is a bit absurd to me, it felt valid, from her perspective. For me, when it comes to humor, I think it's exactly in line with what Cherie and Kevin said. I was looking to tell the truth. I was looking to render my experience and the experience of so many other people authentically on the page. The way that I view the world, it's not all doom and gloom. Of course, there's tragedy and trauma but there's triumph and levity. A lot of serious situations and scenarios are just hilarious.

You think about January 6th, that was my first event for *Black Buck*. That was the storming of the Capitol, the insurrection, or whatever. It's dangerous seeing all these, most of them, white men at the Capitol, got their feet kicked up on this hardwood table like they're in their own house and doing all these things. Me, watching them waving these flags around, I'm like, "Yo, it looks like these guys just watched *Braveheart*, and ran to the Capitol, and are trying to act out like Mel Gibson, or they're at a football game or something." It's hilarious to me even though it's also dangerous.

When it came to *Black Buck*, part of me rendering my experience authentically is showing that, yes, it's hard being the only one that looks like you. Yes, there's real trauma. Yes, racism is at times bizarre, absurd, sometimes innocuous to the point where you're like, "Did that actually happen?" It's horrible, but at the same time, it's not like I wake up and I'm like, "Fuck, I'm Black. Oh, sucks." That's not the way that I live. Humor, for me, was just natural. I think that it was a way to underscore the horror.

The last thing I'll say is that I had Black people in mind while I was writing *Black Buck*, and there are far better writers than me who have written books that are very heavy, and that are devoid of levity, and that focus exclusively on serious topics. I wanted to leave that for them, and to write a book that the Black people that I had in mind, but of course, I'm grateful for anyone who reads the book, but especially will be able to read it and laugh, and be like, "Yes, that is some funny shit." That was my intention, my thinking.

Rumaan: [laughs] As I mentioned earlier, we are going to take audience questions. I actually think I'm going to start taking them now, even though I have some other questions that I want to ask. I think, actually, some of the audience questions seem to dovetail with one of what I'm thinking. One of the questions that's so interesting to me, I'm going to read the way that this is phrased.

Is it really possible to satirize people with money and their narratives? Particularly when centering them without celebrating what you're attempting to satirize, simply by directing attention to luxury, et cetera. Has satire ever been effective when it comes to money? Kevin, you mentioned *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, which I think is a very interesting test case book to answer this question. I feel like this is probably a question you've been asked before, Kevin. What do you think? Can this kind of thing, the power and the absurd, I don't know, what's the word? The absurd quantity of power concentrated in the hands of so few people, is it possible to satirize that? Has that been your experience?

Kevin: I think satire is one of the best ways to look at that topic. I think it's something that's been done for centuries. There's a grand tradition of writing about the wealthy and the powerful. Going back to Machiavelli, going back beyond that, and how do you portray these people? To me, there's something – that satire is so effective as an entry point to looking at something that I think is normally so charged and so taboo and so not discussed.

Jane Austen is another author that comes to mind, that I think people don't think of her as a satirist, but if you read her books about lens, go back to *Pride and Prejudice* and look at Elizabeth Bennett's mother and all the machinating in her mind as she positions her children to make good marriages. That's just one tiny example in so many other moments in that book and another author. I really do think that it's a way in that is perhaps palatable, and it ended up being my way in,

telling these stories, for all these characters. Over four novels now, and completely unintentionally, like I said. [laughs]

Rumaan: Money can buy you a lot. One thing that money cannot buy you is the guarantee that somebody without money is not going to look at you and laugh. Money can't protect you from that. It can't insulate you from being satirized. I guess the question is whether the reader can make that distinction. It's not really the writer's responsibility to make that distinction. The pressure is on the shoulders of the reader, but that's a really interesting question.

Another question that came up in this Q&A that I think is interesting is about the authorial relationship to money, not as a subject, but as the thing that gives you power inside of the business of publishing, and how that affects your own work. Publishing is a business, and we are artists, but you're also responsible or beholden to a corporate force. How does that tension play out in your work? Mateo, tell me that. You spoke about being employed, and being owned, earlier in this conversation. How does that tension feel to you as a working artist?

Mateo: It doesn't affect my work to any conscious degree. In terms of me sitting down in front of this blank Word doc and writing, I'm not like, "Oh, my God. This is going to get me a $1 million advance. Let me write this shit." That's not it. I will say that because of my background in sales and business, I still do have that mind when it comes to what happens off the page, in conversations there. Going into publishing, or getting my foot in, this was my third manuscript.

Bringing up Jason again, Jason schooled me on the publishing industry. He met me while I was working on my second draft of *Black Buck*, and I had already queried two manuscripts, never found representation. This third one, *Black Buck*, I was getting ready for another round with it after I completed my draft. He schooled me on what it meant to have a lead title, and what it meant for a publisher to have skin in the game.

When I got an agent, and we worked on the book, and then we went out on submission to editors, when I first heard the editor say, "This will be our lead title for spring." I said, "Okay. They're going to put some skin in the game. They're going to put a good amount of money behind this," because someone asked the question, who was it? Sean Dempsey, about publishing. Publishing, to a certain extent, is rigged. If a publisher thinks that your book is going to make them money, as Rumaan said, publishing is a business, they're going to put money behind it in order to artificially make it pop, to a certain extent.

If the book isn't good enough, then it's going to be a little flash and pan, it's going to go away. If you don't make the publisher their money back, which is called earning out on your advance, you're [laughs] not blackballed, but no one's going to probably take that bet on you again in the same way, unless you're coming with the Bible, next. For me, yes, when it comes to business conversations, I definitely want to feel as though a publisher has skin in the game. I want to feel good about the number that I'm receiving, but I don't think about it as I'm writing.

Of course, when you publish a book, and if you're lucky enough to have people read it and to have people talking about it, you might have to work harder. I know I do at times. When I sit down in front of the Word doc, to not think about readers, to not think about my editors, to not think about my agent. It's not impossible. The last thing I'll say is that if you have a book, I can only imagine what you experience, Kevin. If you have a book that pops in a certain way, there are more

opportunities economically. Financially advantageous opportunities that people want to put in front of you.

What's most important for me to remember is that no matter which celebrity I meet, no matter which fancy dinner I give a speech in front of, it's not going to help me write better. It's not the work. It doesn't help me when I sit down in the corner of my room over there and try to figure out how to use the same 26 letters to write something. You know what I'm saying? That's my incomplete answer.

Rumaan: [chuckles] Well, as you say, to be a writer working in publishing, say a writer who's active in commercial publishing, is to have these two jobs. One is as an artist, and one is as the businessman who's willing to sit in those meetings and talk to your publicist and behave, like be a good partner to your publisher. Cherie, you have a whole other job. I wonder if you could talk about the relationship between – Is art an outlet separate from your legal practice, or do you see some relationship between the two? Also, just how do you do both of those things, and not have hair as gray as my beard? I don't understand. Explain yourself, please? I think you're still on mute, honey.

Cherie: Yes, sorry about that.

Rumaan: No problem.

Cherie: What I would say is that writing is intrinsic to who I am as a person. Before there was a career, I wrote. I always wrote, I'll continue to write. One of the interesting things about it was, I had this big plan about how I was going to get an agent, and a book deal, and I had it all planned out step by step. I worked that plan for probably just over 20 years without anything happening.

Interestingly enough, for me, it was at the point at which I wouldn't say abandon the plan, but the plan became less important, and the work returned to preeminence because before that, yes, I was working, but it was always like, yes, and I'm going to get because I want to be able to just do this full-time. That's what I'm working towards. A couple of things went wrong in that journey. I had to just look at myself and say, "You know what, whether you get the agent or the book deal or whatever, you're still going to write. Just let it be about the writing."

That was one of the things I did because in this journey, I've done all this. I quit my job and decided I was going to devote myself to my writing, thousands and thousands of miles away from home. Writing is a little bit harder when you need to figure out how you're going to eat first. There were some interesting lessons that I learned. I've done that. I've quit everything and just given it up for the writing, and had to come back to the day job. I started to look at my writing almost as I did my child, in that I just had this strong sense that as much as possible, I wasn't going to burden my work with the requirement to give back to me.

If anything, I needed to do what I needed to do to try to support it. After that, there was no question of not working, not having some sort of job. It was about giving this work the space and the nourishment to grow and be its best self. I think once I got rid of some of those notions, it's so ironic, that's when I got the agent, and the book deal, and all the rest of it when I'd given up on that. I think that was a really important lesson for me, personally. In terms of my legal career, I would say the two things influence each other.

Certainly, when the book that I'm working on now, for example, my ability to do research, because I've had to do a lot more research for this particular work than say, *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*. I think my legal training helps with that. I think my creativity helps me in my legal practice with coming up with stories about things. How things happen, how things might go, how best to respond to particular things. Generally speaking, it's almost like two different sides of my brain that operate. Really, the career is about being able to give myself that time and space to do my work, which I consider my calling. My true calling.

Rumaan: Kevin, I want to ask you the same question because as Mateo pointed out, you're someone who's really been successful in publishing. You, yourself, described your falling into this material almost by accident. This material that you've explored across four books. That it wasn't necessarily what you thought you were going to be doing artistically. Does that come with a different kind of responsibility now?

Are you surprised by the way that you feel about how it feels to have published so successfully, and what it means for whatever comes next for you artistically, or do you feel free, like you could just write a book of sonnets next, and you would be fine with that? How do you reconcile that?

Kevin: It's interesting because *Crazy Rich Asians*, when I first wrote it, was truly a passion project, and was never meant to be published at all. I really thought it had absolutely no commercial potential. It was a story I wanted to write, and just share with a few friends, maybe self-publish. It's interesting just listening to what Cherie had to say also, in terms of when you believe all the notions of wanting to construct that bestseller, and you just write from the heart, and you write from your truth, look what happened.

Most people don't know that I had a whole career in publishing before *Crazy Rich Asians*, where I mainly worked on non-fiction books. There were all these really clever ideas I was trying to sell that never sold. There were lots of hits and misses. It's funny, this was supposed to be not even on the hit or miss pile. This was the personal pile that, had I known would have done so well, I probably would have published it under a whole different name, quite frankly. It's interesting now, the success of *Crazy Rich Asians* and that trilogy, in a strange way, it's paradoxical. It's freed me to be a little more experimental.

I'm now writing book two of this new trilogy. Each book is going to be an homage to a different classic. The first one, *Sex and Vanity*, was an homage to *A Room with a View*. The second one, I can't tell you yet what it's going to be about, but –

Rumaan: Oh, what a tease.

Kevin: – it's given me license to play, in a way, because for me that's a challenge. How do I take this beloved book and really kind of make it my own, reinterpret, reinvent. I guess, since I've made the publisher some money, I can now afford to make them lose money. [laughs] That's the way I'm looking at it, and I can just really be more creative. This is private, right?

Rumaan: Really, what I think is that you have to take money out of this equation, in some strange way, because as you said, and as Cherie said, and Mateo described, writing books that didn't succeed prior to *Black Buck*, that didn't get to the publisher. You actually just have to do what you want to do. If it were possible to calculate a way to write a bestseller, then more people would do

it. If it were possible to write a book that was going to become a really big movie, well, then certainly, everybody would do it, and that's part of the reason it drives me crazy when certain people disdain commercially successful books, because it's not easy.

It's not easy, and sometimes it's about luck, and sometimes it's about a different kind of intelligence. Anyway, I think that the success of something like art can't really be measured in dollars anyway, right? You just have to go back to your desk, Mateo has to go back to that little corner in his room, and like, get back to writing. I feel like I should have a really big final question. My big final question is really dumb, and now I don't want to ask it. I guess maybe I'll ask you this question about place, because place is really evocative in all three of these books.

For Kevin, in particular, the way that you write about Italy, and for Cherie, the way you write about Barbados, and for Mateo, the way that you write about Brooklyn. People always ask writers, I think, writers of fiction, whether their books are about real people. I think that that's a lie. I don't think it's true. Fiction is not about real people necessarily, even if you steal from them, but you're all writing about real places. I wonder if that felt like a challenge to you, to write about this place that you loved. Kevin, especially when you mentioned wanting to write this book in Italy but not being able to actually be in Italy.

Kevin: I even dedicated the book to Capri. It's a place that so inspired me in a way that it's inspired so many other authors, but as much as the book is about Capri, it's also my Valentine to Manhattan. That, to me, has equal weight within this book. Yes, I think you really see that both these places, Capri and New York, become characters of their own, I think, within the novel. They're places always central to me, the way that Singapore was so important to the *Crazy Rich Asian* trilogy.

Rumaan: Cherie, you talked about having a different perspective on the palm tree with the hammocks. You're seeing it from a different angle. Did that feel frightening or challenging to write about Barbados, a place that you know and inhabit, for a readership that doesn't know it the same way? Did that feel scary to you, or like it came with a responsibility?

Cherie: Listen, it wasn't scary. I ditched the whole notion of responsibility to anything other than the story that I'm writing a couple years back in my writing career, but for me, writing is often the way that I work things out in my mind. I wrestle with stories, I wrestle with concepts in my work. I think I do have a pretty complex relationship with Barbados. It's definitely a love, hate type thing. It's like, it's this beautiful place, there are lots of things about it that people would consider wonderful, but there are other aspects to it as well.

I think that's one of the things that I saw come out in this work. That complex relationship with this place, with this island that I'm on, surrounded by water, that people come to because it's so beautiful, but there are other aspects to it that I wanted to talk about, that were relevant to this story. For me, there was no responsibility. People have asked me like, "Are Bajans mad? Do they look at you and say, 'Oh, you're airing dirty laundry in public. How could you tell people about this aspect? You're damaging tourism or whatever.'"

I didn't feel that at all. I didn't feel that responsibility. I just felt that I had to write about this place, and explore this place in the context of this story. It wasn't hard, but definitely, Barbados as a whole and the beach in particular, I think, became a character, much as Kevin says. In this novel, the

beach just is really, really important. It's central to the story, and the story wouldn't be the same without it.

Rumaan: Mateo, how about you? How was that experience of rendering Brooklyn on the page? It feels like a place that you know. Was that fraught or did you feel free to do whatever you wanted?

Mateo: I felt free, but I didn't make up a bunch of stuff. I might have placed a barbershop in a certain place where it didn't exist. When it came to Brooklyn, no, it wasn't difficult. I lived down the street when I was 21. On my own version of the come up, working in the world of startups and sales, back when I wasn't even in sales at the startup, I was an intern. These people wouldn't even pay for a $45 Metro card.

I was living in Bed-Stuy down the street from where a lot of those scenes take place. When it came to the office, I'm not going to lie, and I can say this because I passed it through lawyers, I set it in the same exact building I worked in. I set it at 3 Park Avenue, where I worked, with the same Starbucks I used to go into, and I had to [unintelligible] because I was like, "All right, should I make it 1 Park Avenue? Even though I don't even know if it exists." I set it in the same exact place.

I switched up the office a little bit just so I wouldn't have the 230 people I used to work with being like, "Oh, my God, he wrote about the place one to one." I'm like, "No, we never had this type of coffee." What's crazy is that when we were on submission with my publisher, they said that they are located in the same exact building. They thought that I [unintelligible] the narrative to them at 3 Park Avenue. I said, "That is genius." No, I didn't tell her where it was set. "I didn't know that you were in that building, and I hope you never saw me many years ago when I was there, because I wasn't acting right."

For me, it was very important for these two worlds where a lot of the book takes place, Manhattan and Brooklyn, more specifically Midtown and Bed-Stuy, to be almost two complete different worlds with their own species, almost, of people and sounds and foods because I wanted the contrast between who Darren was, and where he was starting from, and where he was going to be so stark, that the reader would just feel it subconsciously that something's off and that there are going to be consequences that Darren's going to have to pay for from moving from one world to another, even though it's just a mile or so away.

Rumaan: Yes, just a subway ride away, but worlds away. Okay, again, selling your own book is very embarrassing, so I'm going to sell it on behalf of these writers. This is Kevin Kwan's *Sex and Vanity*, it really made me want to go to Capri. Mateo's book, *Black Buck*, beautiful book. This is Cherie's book, *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*. It was such a pleasure hearing from all of you tonight. Really, I wish it could have happened in-person.

Before we go, Amanda Liaw, from the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, has a few words for everyone. Thank you, all of you. It was such a great pleasure to talk to you guys tonight.

Mateo: Thank you, Rumaan. Thank you, everyone.

Cherie: Thanks for having me. It's really been a pleasure.

Kevin: Thank you.

Amanda Liaw: Thank you, Rumaan. Good evening, everyone. I'd like to give another big thank you to Rumaan, Kevin, Mateo, and Cherie for tonight's illuminating conversation on money, satire, bodies, and place, and so much more. Thank you to each of you, on the other end of the screen, for being here with us tonight, and for asking such thoughtful questions that allowed for the breadth and depth of this space.

If you enjoyed tonight's program, I hope that you will consider contributing to PEN/Faulkner by completing our post-event survey, and if you're able, by making a donation through the link that we'll provide in the chat.

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

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Once again, thank you for being part of our literary conversation tonight. Have a great evening, and we hope to be with you soon.