Literary Conversations: Storied History

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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: *Libertie* by Kaitlyn Greenidge, *The Great Mistake* by Jonathan Lee, and *The Mountains Sing* by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai.

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello everyone. I am Gwydion Suilebhan. I am the Executive Director of PEN/Faulkner. Thank you so much for being with us tonight, we are very lucky to have you here. Our mission is to celebrate literature and to provide the connections between readers and writers that enrich and inspire us all. To achieve that mission, we run education programs that bring literary opportunities to students in low-income schools in D.C. We celebrate tremendous literary achievements with the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction and the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story.

We hold programs like this one that generate thrilling and provocative dialogue about big ideas and we can't do any of that without you. I want to thank everyone who contributed to be here tonight. I am incredibly grateful to have your support. Now, just a few quick technical notes, live captions are provided tonight, and then you can toggle them on and off using the little CC button down there at the bottom of the screen. There will be a Q&A session at the end of tonight's program. Please submit your questions using the Q&A button so we can surface the ones to get everybody started.

It really doesn't work unless you all join in. Thank you, in advance, for submitting questions. Lastly, you can find our authors' books for sale at Politics & Prose and we're going to drop the links to those books into the chat, and I hope you'll get them all because they're all amazing. Speaking of those books and their authors, I want to introduce our panelists tonight.

First, we have Kaitlyn Greenidge, who is a contributing writer for *The New York times* and the features Director at Harper's Bazaar. Her debut novel *We Love You, Charlie Freeman* was one of *The New York Times* Critics' Top 10 Books of 2016. Next, we have Jonathan Lee, who is the author of four novels most recently, *The Great Mistake*, as well as the Editorial Director of Bloomsbury.

We have, Quế Mai, who is the author of eight books of poetry fiction and nonfiction in Vietnamese and her writing has been translated and published in more than 15 countries, and our moderator tonight, Bethanne Patrick is not only a PEN/Faulkner Board Vice President and our Literary Programs Committee Chair, she is also a writer and critic whose reviews and profiles appear in the *Los Angeles Times*, on NPR books, *The Boston Globe*, basically everywhere. She is a 2021Virginia Center for the Creative Arts Fellow in nonfiction, and her memoir, *Life B*, will be coming out in 2023, from Counterpoint Press, and with that, Bethanne, I am going to turn it over to you. Thank you.

Bethanne Patrick: Thank you, Gwydion. It is great to be back on the Literary Conversation stage with three such amazing panelists, and I mentioned to the panelists in the green room

beforehand, that I've covered each of them in a very different way, and that's really exciting to me, both as a board member at PEN/Faulkner and as the moderator of this conversation about historical fiction.

I'm going to ask everyone to indulge me as I read, not my own words, but someone else's, and those words are from scholar and cultural critic, Megan O'Grady, who a few years ago, in her column, in *T Magazine* at *The New York Times*, wrote about what she and I call the new historical fiction. I just want to read a few lines from her piece, because I think they really describe well what all three of the panelists tonight are engaged in as writers, and what we want to talk about this evening as well. Megan O'Grady said, "Making sense of our lives and of the unfathomable world in which we find ourselves has necessitated an understanding of what has come before.

The past we inherit speaks to us individually and collectively, but a common thread, much less a consensus view of reality, feels increasingly hard to come by." "As visions of the future increasingly fail in the face of our present moment, literary authors are increasingly looking back, not to comfort us with a sense of known past, or even an easy allegory of the present, but instead to seek reasons for why we are the way we are and how we got here, and at what point the train began to derail."

"Few many for too long were left out, the true architectures of power concealed. Theirs are novels that reveal the emptiness of the old stories, destabilizing our ideas of history rather than affirming them, which is, after all, one purpose of literary fiction. In our days of sloganeering and apocryphal tweets, it's also a form of resistance." "A new generation of writers is rewriting the old stories with skin very much in the game, a rebellion against history and memory. The process of remembering is, by definition, an act of imagination and invention, and the hardest stories to tell have become the stories we need most, those in which there is no tweetable takeaway, only the invisible dead, the ghosts who lie in wait."

Thank you, Megan O'Grady, for those very wise words, and also, I had to read that because I spent much time on Twitter, and she's right. There's no tweetable takeaway for the historical fiction that you three are writing and working on, and I'm going to start with a question that comes from Megan O'Grady's words. Here we are flailing in a world filled with natural disasters, a pandemic, war, why do we read and write historical fiction? Who wants to take on that tiny little question first? Someone unmute yourself [laughs].

Kaitlyn Greenidge: I can start.

Bethanne: Thank you, Kaitlyn.

Kaitlyn: I write it and I read history and historical fiction to remind us of our current moment is just one of many moments in time, and we are living through times where everything can feel like an existential threat, but I remember maybe five or six years ago, having really long conversations with my mother around where is there a trajectory of how you're supposed to live in times where it feels like the future feels very, very dim and a place where maybe we don't really want to be.She and a lot of thinkers I say, that I really admire, remind me again and again that the world has ended many times for many different types of people.

Forget that is a sort of privilege of itself, to feel like this time is the only time where people have felt in great calamity is itself a not real narrative. For me, I read historical fiction to remind myself that there have always been alternative ways of being that are much more complex than

what our current moment can offer us in terms of choices of how we want to live our lives in times that feel like there's real danger or peril, or just great uncertainty.

Bethanne: Thank you. That actually is really interesting to me, because it's not just about course correction. It's not just about, "Let's get it right." It sounds like you're talking about dare I say it, something that feels a little bit like hope, like we might learn something even in very dark times.

Kaitlyn: Yes. I think hope is a really complex word because it's like one of those words that feel everybody knows what it means, but it means very different things to different people. When I think of the word hope, I think of less this idea that everything will turn out well regardless, or people will always act the way that you expect them that they're going to act, or things will always follow.

We're writers, so things will always follow if we act structure. Somehow whatever story we see is going to unfold, they'll be at the critical moment, then we'll reach some grand finale. But I do think of hope more as staying curious about the wider world and curious about what humans have done both in good ways and bad ways, and in also ambiguous ways throughout time. Reminding ourselves of all the paths that are open in every single moment that we're living through.

Bethanne: Thank you. Any response, Jonathan or Quế?

Jonathan Lee: I really like what Kaitlyn just said. It also made me think of-- in the Megan O'Grady quote about there not being a tweetable takeaway. I immediately thought of tweetable takeaway that I saw today [laughs]. The tweet was a line from a random guy on Twitter today he said, "We live our lives forward, but we understand them backward." I don't think it was his line. I think he stole it from CareGuard or someone fancy like that.

I think it connects with the idea we're talking about and part of the fascination of reading good historical fiction and maybe the fascination of in writing it too, because there's that thrill of discovering an origin story, which is something we all innately understand in some way, whether is an attempt to understand the past, whatever that is, or your past or your family's past, or in my case, I was interested in writing about the origin story of New York and researching that. I'd lived here for 10 years and just got interested in that.

There's that sense that, you can write what you know or you can write what you want to know about, and the past is obviously rich territory for finding those kinds of stories Kaitlyn mentioned where there may be hope there, or there might be something really depressing and finding out that many other ages live through the same kinds of issues, or that things haven't changed or that things have, but there's so much fertile ground to dig around it, I guess.

Bethanne: There is a lot of fertile ground to dig around in, sometimes in some of the latest historical fiction, people really are digging for lots and lots and lots of different reasons. Quế Mai, one of the things I know that you are really interested in, in all of your work, but particularly in *The Mountains Sing* is showing a completely different view of Vietnam, and in particular, its women and that's quite interesting because many avid readers are women, many readers of historical fiction are women, but many of them do not know anything about Vietnam, about the women who live there. When you began writing, what was it that drew you toward historical fiction? I know you don't always write historical fiction, correct?

Quế Mai: Yes. Thank you for this great panel, I really love listening to you. I started my writing career in Vietnamese, I started writing poetry, and the more I read, the more I became frustrated at the way Vietnamese people are represented in Western fiction, if you google Vietnam literature, or Vietnam fiction, you still see titles which are written by Western writers about the Vietnam War. Normally Vietnam is only seen as a war. In Hollywood movies or in a lot of books about Vietnam.

The Vietnamese people do not give a voice, we simply act as the background to the Western story. I wanted to reclaim the Vietnamese narrative and import the voices of Vietnamese women in the forefront because I read a statistic that more women and children die because of wars and conflicts than men. Normally, in talking about war narrative, men are different the center stage because we look at wars and conflict as only as of the number of deaths and of the injured on the battlefield, but we don't think so much about the impact on family structures, and nature, on the fabric, on the societies, and the long-lasting trauma that women and children have to inherit, especially intergenerational trauma as well.

I want to document that in my fiction. Also in Vietnam, the official viewpoint is that we won the war, there is no trauma. There has been no chance for us as a country to [unintelligible], so many Vietnamese died in the war, more than three million Vietnamese, and many were killed by our own hands because the North and the South were fighting against each other. Officially, we don't know that, we don't have a memorial for those who fought alongside Americans and died.

In our culture, we believe that wandering spirits because they are not honored, they're not knowledgeable. My novel uses something very sensitive, the reconciliation among Vietnamese people outside. When it comes to the Vietnamese conflict, that should be the center stage, is not the trauma of the American people. I'm sorry to say. Even though many folks have written about American trauma, but when it comes to the Vietnam War, more Vietnamese people have suffered and continued to suffer, and don't have the chance to heal yet. That's why I had to write English to insert a voice from Vietnam and the Vietnamese movement into the canon.

Bethanne: I'm so glad you said what you just said about creating a voice because our first short reading each panelist will read tonight is going to be from Jonathan and I wanted to have him read because he's going to read from the very beginning of *The Great Mistake* and he's giving a voice to a person who's been forgotten in so many ways but also in *The Great Mistake*, Jonathan, we can talk about this later, you give voice to a part of him that has not received any voice before. Would you read for us, please, Jonathan Lee? And then we'll talk briefly about how each of you chose to introduce your particular time period, so, Jonathan.

Jonathan: Thanks so much. I'll just read the first paragraph of the book which is called *The Great Mistake* and it's about this guy Andrew Haswell Green who's forgotten civic leader in New York, in the 19th century, without whom there'd be no Central Park and no New York Public Library and no Metropolitan Museum of Art. He died on Friday, November 13th, 1903. This is how I start. The last attempt on the life of Andrew Haswell Green took place on Park Avenue in 1903.

News of his murder filled the front page of the New York Times. Father of greater New York shot in front of his home. The motive was off-stage and accounted for- Speculation filled *The Herald*, *The Tribune*, *The Sun*. Some writers got excited by the victim's fame or the five shots fired. Others stared straight faced at the date of his death Friday, November 13th. Citizens prone to long necked dreams carried pocket pieces on unlucky days like these. Rabbits feet and

rusty screws, Pope Pius IX in a paper weight, the pit of a peach named "Stump of the World", items mute and immune to worry, charms to protect them from Bedlam.

At the age of 83, Andrew had no time for fetishes. The things he trusted late in life were grass and trees and weeds, buildings and bridges made of stone, and after his absurd ending had faded from the news, a marble bench was erected in his name in Central Park. This small Memorial can still be found overlooking the open greenery of Fort Fish. On Tuesday mornings, a person with cleaning supplies arrives to remove last week's bird chip with a brush, which is where I discovered his story just when I used to have time to walk around places I found his bench in Central Park

Bethanne: When we all walked around just easily everywhere. Thank you so much, Jonathan, because I do you think that you're opening and there's so much more going on in this book sets the stage for your time period. Would you talk about that for a moment and then I will move on to our other panelists about what you wanted to convey in that open, how you wanted us to see and understand New York at that time?

Jonathan: Yes, I keep telling myself that for my next novel I won't write something set in deep history because the research is so fun in some ways, but also writing about someone and trying to capture 83 years of their life. I felt like every year and almost every day required a different couple months of research because the city was changing so fast. With that opening, I just focused on-- I loved reading in *The New York Times* archives accounts of things that specifically happen on specific days that I wanted to set things in the book. I loved the little news, different newspapers perspectives on his death and throughout the first chapter, I introduced some of those.

There's an Alexander Hemon book called *The Lazarus Project* that I really liked that did something similar. It seemed to me fun to point out some of the instabilities in the historical record, there are accounts that say that it was bright sunlight when he was killed and then *The New York Mirror* says that it was raining and *The New York Herald* was like, "It was a very windy, dark, stormy day." It's like people just making this up, like fiction writers. I got interested in that.

The other thing I wanted to get across, I suppose, in setting the scene was that sense of looking back on the past and there's that good Virginia wolf line in her diaries where she says, "I meant to write about death, but life kept breaking in as usual." I wanted from the outset for it to be a book about his death, but to just introduce more and more little glimpses of the life in between the death sentences in a way, and all the little mistakes that happen in the accounting of events, as well as the events themselves, and also have some fun with that and try and make it feel bouncy and interesting and not the dusty fusty of stuff that people sometimes expect from historical fiction, I guess.

Bethanne: There it definitely in this incredible mystery in the great mistake of why he was shooted why he was murdered. There's nothing dusty or fusty or musty. I can assure everyone of that. Now, Kaitlyn, how about you? You are also writing about this historical period and you start in New York. You start in New York City, although there's a lot going on in your book as well and we go to Haiti in Liberty. What did you want to immerse readers in from the get-go? Was it a certain [unintelligible] or a city life versus island life? Was it racism? Was it all of the above plus more? How did you want readers to find their way into Liberty's story?

Kaitlyn: Well I think like Jonathan said, I too wanted to avoid the more stayed parts of historical fiction that can often happen, and I wanted the world that readers entered to feel

very familiar. I didn't want to have that distance of the past. I tried really hard not to mention historical everyday details unless they were really necessary. I tried really hard not to really describe the petty coats and the walnuts and all that kind of stuff. I love reading that stuff sometimes, but for this project, I wanted it to really feel as if the characters are really immediate and the strangeness of the past wasn't necessarily in the everyday details, but in these alternative ways of thinking that existed in that time period.

One of the really fun parts of doing the research was reading all these diaries and newspaper columns from people writing during reconstruction and right after slavery and seeing all the explosion of ideas about how to live that people had sort of like, "I'm throwing anything and everything against the wall", because you're talking about the end of an institution that was a 100 years old that most people thought was going to last forever and all of a sudden it's over and there's this huge expansion of how can we actually define our lives.

That was the sense of possibility that I wanted to capture because I wanted to write a novel, that's about reconstruction in the US, that talks around reconstruction in the US, but I didn't want it to rely on the historical irony of the reader knowing how that failed. I wanted to capture the immense promise and activity and excitement that people had in that moment that felt when I was reading those accounts really similar to other historic moments I've lived through where it feels like finally things are going to change, like something's really happening here, something really exciting is happening here. I feel like I can put my excitement over here, and then over the course of time things continue to play out and it's not as simple as that initial burst of excitement.

Bethanne: I'm going to confess here that even though I find it stultifying in a way, I cannot resist watching the gilded age, and for this very reason because the sense of possibility in the air in certain eras in history is so infectious. I think that's why sometimes, and I'm really glad you brought up the bustles and hoop skirt aspect because historical romance is certainly part of historical fiction, but it isn't all of historical fiction. I want anyone out there, including Kaitlyn and me, because we read it too and Jonathan may as well, who knows.

Historical romance books can be really entertaining and some of them can really be incredibly accurate as well, but it's not the same as literary fiction that tackles history, and I think it's really important, Kaitlyn, as you were saying, to know what you're trying to bring forth for the reader. Sometimes a reader wants a lot of costume detail, sometimes a reader wants or, dare I say, needs, to know something a little bit more, to have something more to chew on, shall I say? I really appreciate what you're you said. Quế Mai, I want to give you a chance to talk about how you introduced your historical time period as well. Thank you for letting me interject for that time.

Quế Mai: I want to thank Jonathan for a very nice reading. I love your book, Jonathan. I had no idea about Andrew Green.

Bethanne: Amazing.

Quế Mai: I love Central Park. I love the New York Public Library. Many times I had no idea about the man who plays such an important role in giving life to these monuments and these wonderful places, and your book brought his life to life and it was just amazing to be, so thank you. For me, like Jonathan and Kaitlyn, people employed can take a timeline to create suspense

in the whole plot. I have done the same. My novel opens with one of the two characters. Hương burning incense for her grandmother in front of the family out.

The grandmother tells Hương the challenges faced by Vietnamese people are as tall as mountains. Then the reader gets to see the [unintelligible] mountain, how to survive the American bombings of Hà Noi in 1972. Each chapter then on serves as a tall mountain, how to overcome the Japanese invasion, the French occupation, the land reform. How family members reconcile while having fought opposite each other in the Vietnam War, and how to forgive each other.

I think the notion of forgiveness is important for me because I feel like the circle of violence that we experience nowadays in the world will not stop unless there's more forgiveness, more empathy, and more understanding. I think historical fiction has a role to play in terms of wars and conflict. People are normally reduced to fail faceless statistics. They are not looked at as human beings anymore, because there's so many people who've died, or who are injured that they become statistics. Historical fiction enables us to travel back to the past and look at those people and live their life as well and become a part of them.

I think with *The Mountains Sing*, I wanted to travel to the past and to continue the oral storytelling tradition of the women of Vietnam where the grandmother tells her family story to her granddaughter, who will continue her family story so that circle goes on. I really believe that Vietnamese people have survived throughout history because thanks to our storytelling traditions.

Bethanne: Well, this is the perfect segue into your reading, Quế Mai. Then we can talk about scene-setting a little bit and how important that is for characters who come from different eras. Would you read from *The Mountains Sing* for us, please?

Quế Mai: Okay. Before I begin my short reading, I'd like to thank the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for having me today. I want to thank my editor, Betsy, for being here. I'm really lucky to be working with Betsy. She understands Vietnam so well and she really respects my decision, for example, to embrace the full Vietnamese tone of marks in Vietnamese language and the characters' names in my novel. I think it's very important to me because due to colonization, Vietnamese language has suffered so much loss.

Whenever our language-- usually when Vietnamese language is published as part of the English practice it's stripped off is the prefix and the prefixes are as important as the roots to our home. By the little markings will define the meanings of each word. For example, the word ma means ghosts. If you add a mark like ma means mother, ma means grave, mạ means young rice plants, ma means bad, ma means horse. The little marking that gives prefixes are very important. I want to challenge the readers as well, and invite them into the Vietnamese culture being my writing. That is so supportive in my mission to decolonize literature about Vietnam.

Let me read a short part from page 69 of my novel. "During the years that she was gone, I imagined seeing my mother again every day. I imagined disappearing into her embrace, into the river of her hair, into her soft breast. I imagined our voices rising like kites from under the shade of our new bond tree. By the beginning of 1975, rumors spread that the war was really ending, and I imagine my mother flying me down the streets of Hà Noi on the back of grandma's bicycle."

"We would scream at the top of our lungs as the bike rush us into a brilliant summer, into red flower, into purple button lung petals that blossomed above pavements [unintelligible] by bomb shelters. We would stop at the lake of the returns ward delighting at the delirious [unintelligible] of crunch ice cream. In my dream, my mother always returned with my father. He was told and handsome. Sometimes he would rush towards me on his two feet. Sometimes he struggled on his single leg leaning on a grouch. Sometimes he embraced me with his two strong arms.

At other times he had no arms at all. Just two lumps of soft flesh protruding from his shoulders, but he always laugh as he called my name, [unintelligible] my daughter." This scene is set in Hà Noi in Hương imagination. It lets the reader travel into this young girl's mind and fuel her longing for her parents. I write this book when I was away from Vietnam. I wrote this book to return home, to let home land alive around me.

I also love Hà Noi so much. Hà Noi is the city, the capital of Vietnam. I met my husband there and fell in love and gave birth to my two children there. I don't know, it's more than a thousand years old, but it suffered so much and a lot of the city was destroyed during the war. I set that novel there because I think for me Hà Noi is really the soul of Vietnam and it bears witness to our very candle of hope that was stoled.

Jonathan: You're muted Bethanne, I think.

Bethanne: Thank you. Sorry. What a rookie mistake [laughs]. What I wanted to say is that unlike Jonathan and Kaitlyn's books, Quế Mai, yours is set in much more recent past. Sometimes we talk about things going in the present. I'm so sorry about that ringing telephone everyone, really. This is a source of constant difficulty when you have two people working from home in the same house. I'm sure everyone understands. Thank you for your patience. What I want to say is that writing about the 1970s is much different than writing about the 1870s, for example.

You were just talking, Quế Mai, about recalling a place that you know really well, yet in a different time period. When I talk about setting in historical fiction, for example, Kaitlyn, Jonathan. We all know New York, but we don't know the New York that you are writing about and we can research it. But, what did you find out either of you can answer this about New York that really surprised you? That wasn't just, "Oh, of course, people rode horses in the street", that kind of thing. Something that just really opened up a scene or a character or anything for you.

Jonathan: I guess with New York one of the things I probably knew on one level but kept being surprised by was just how undervalued the idea of public space has been for most of history. Thinking about the making of a great city and how far along things can get before anyone thinks, "Hey, it might actually be good to have a public park that someone can go into, or a public library." Andrew Haswell Green, the guy at the center of the novel, he came from Massachusetts, he was a farm boy. He became an apprentice at a general store in New York at the age of 15. He couldn't find anywhere where he could afford to walk because all of the pleasure gardens were ticketed.

It was really expensive to get in. He couldn't find anywhere where he could indulge his interest in reading because you needed a month's salary to be able to belong to one of these private libraries that were dotted around New York. To see how slowly that came about, and also finish the novel and promote the novel at a time when we were thinking about public space in big

cities in a different way, and appreciating when a public school was open or appreciating a empty beach or a park in a different way as a gathering point was a cool thing to think about for me.

Bethanne: That is really interesting. It also Kaitlyn makes me think of your scenes-- well, part of the book that's set in Haiti and how Americans and other Westerners have such a view of Haiti now being just impoverished and overrun with political and violent conflict. It has a lot of problems now, but it didn't always have the same problems.

It didn't always have the same layers of problems.

One of the things in *Libertie* that I learned and this isn't what you have to talk about, but I thought these are different layers of strata in Haiti from the ones that I know. That must have been really interesting for you to dig into because they are something you can't go back to even if you visited the island, even if you knew people who'd lived there for quite a while.

Kaitlyn: That was a real challenge when I was starting to write the book because I was going to be writing about a period in Haitian history where there weren't that many books in English about. We have a lot of histories of the revolution and there's a lot of stuff published in English about Haiti in the 20th century both during US occupation and then later. This time slice of time period time, 1870s, 1880s felt more daunting to research because of that. I started to read so many different accounts of--

I knew I was going to be writing about an American Going to Haiti too, so that was the other challenge too. The character herself isn't Haitian herself. Realizing that was actually incredibly freeing because it was like, "Oh, this character can make mistakes. This character can read a room completely wrong. This character can mistranslate, this character can not catch a nuance in a conversation and it all makes sense because she's a newly arrived visitor in this country." Once I realized that part of it, it was incredibly framed to be like, "Okay, then I don't have to know anything and everything about this particular time period.

I just have to know as much as what the character can see, because that's how much she knows about this particular world." Like said, I was also very lucky in that I found all of these accounts of black American missionaries going to Haiti in the late 19th and early 20th century and their letters back and forth and their descriptions of marketplaces and also what the American homes looked like versus what the Haitian homes look like. Just really fascinating details.

What was most helpful about that too was, less the particular details but most of the attitudes. What I tried to capture was even black Americans at that particular moment, the ones who were choosing to go to Haiti and also write about it back home. were writing from a very particular point of view where they have a very particular idea of being missionaries or their own semi-colonizing force. Which is a very interesting dynamic to play with as a fiction writer. As soon as I read that, I thought, "Okay, there's a real tension here that's unexpected that will be really fun to dive into. That's going to be a surprise to most readers when they pick us up."

Bethanne: Well, that is the perfect segue into your reading. I want to hear about how the perspective from which you write changes the story you tell. Of course, I'm talking about the complete elimination of the white gays in *Libertie*, but I might be also talking about eliminating other things as you just were. I know you're going to read a scene that takes place in the states

about the draft riots that it's very relevant. Kaitlyn, please feel free to introduce it any way you like my intros institution.

Kaitlyn: Well, that's my fault. I didn't tell you what I was reading until 20 minutes ago.

[laughter]

Kaitlyn: Well, I apologize for that. I'm going to be reading from a section of the book. It's about maybe like a third into the book. The main character Libertie is in her teens and it takes place during the civil war. She lives in Kings County what's now considered Brooklyn. She's a little bit removed from the war also because she's living in this free Black village that's based on Weeksville that was in central Brooklyn starting in the 1830s. Her first experience with the war is she's seeing refugees come from Manhattan to Brooklyn escaping the draft riots which took place in July of 1863.

Where white mobs in Manhattan attacked both Black businesses and Black businesses' homes and institutions and their white allies and just intense violence. They have burned the orphanage. Just a really violent instruction in the middle of the civil war. I'm going to read the section where Libertie, she's at the waterfront in downtown Brooklyn waiting to see who's made it across the river to Brooklyn the morning after the first night of the riots.

When we got to the waterfront, the whole stretch was empty. There were no boats. "Where are they all?" Ms. Diana said and only the wave slapping the bottom of the wharf answered her. By then, it was just after dawn. The water before us was first a long line of silver and then a sudden wall of cloud and fog. The smoke from all the fires, the white set that was rolling over to us across the wide expansive river. It mixed with the muggy July dawn into one swelling mass of white and gray set on top of the water.

I had never seen smoke mixed with fog like that before. However like a curtain between this world and maybe the next, from light to dark, from heaven to hell, from sleep to consciousness. This was where the woman in the water lived. Even now I knew it. I knew it in my bones and I felt how foolishly I had spent the last year looking for her in common well water when she was here all along. When I stood with the woman on the dock as I tried to see what was coming to them through the veil, I prayed to her, that woman, "Let them through, let them through, let them through."

I heard the tiniest drop of a wave. The sound a fish makes when it turns over on the surface of the water and falls back to its home. Was that her? Was that her by-word? I thought it was. I knew it was because the next thing I saw finally was something nosing its way through the clouds. It was a long boat with four rowers, two at the bow, two at the stern followed by two more. As they got closer, I could see that the rowers had creatures wrapped around their mouths to keep from breathing in the smoke as they worked. Their hats pulled down over their eyes to keep them from singing in the wind.

Between the rowers on the boats were tens of children and what was most scary about it all was that the only sound was the water slapping the oars. Even the babies were silent. Then the first boat docked and the women all around me took in a deep breath and they began to sing, "Deep river my home is over Jordan. Deep river my home is over Jordan."

By the time we got to the chorus, a baby in one of the boats began to cry a big robust yell as if he was trying to harmonize with us, and the women all around me broke out in whoops.

"That's it." Ms. Anny called out. "Keep it up." Then the other babies began to cry as well and I have never seen a group of women happier to hear a bunch of infants bowling at 5:00 in the morning. I'll stop there. Oh, you're still muted.

Bethanne: Here I go again.

[laughter]

Bethanne: I just got this message in all caps, unmute. I'm sorry, I was really lost in that passage. [laughs] Sorry, everyone. I have just been asking you Kaitlyn about this but all three of you could talk about this. What was your biggest surprise? I know Jonathan, you talked about open spaces and green spaces but what was the thing in researching these books that just made you either it was completely unexpected or gave you that shiver like you knew that you'd found a key to unlocking something if that makes sense.

Kaitlyn: Well, for me it was a bunch of different things. I think in the passage I just read, there's a reference to a woman in the water. For me, when I was studying the book in Haiti, I knew that I wanted to. write something about voodoo, but I didn't really know how I was going to do that in a way that would make sense for the characters, because I didn't want this to be a magical realist novel necessarily. As I read more about that religious practice and its origins and the echoes back and forth across the Atlantic.

I'd read about it before and so I knew that those echoes existed, but it was just really satisfying to see it in the research and it was a really fun thing to play with with the characters to figure out how they were going to feel this overarching way of ordering the universe and ordering their ways in it that made sense for both Haiti and New York City.

Bethanne: Yet has nothing to do with the Judeo-Christian Tradition. It was completely outside of that. That's really amazing. How about you Quế Mai?

Quế Mai: For me, I interviewed hundreds of people for *The Mountains Sing* and was really surprised how willing they were to share their stories with me. It was just incredible because I think because people have buried a lot of trauma inside of themselves. I think that's how the need to share and if you know the right question to ask, you can open rivers and streams of stories. People could have spent days talking with me. One of the most astonishing stories that one of my closest friend shared with me was of how her own grandmother had to run away from the land reform.

She had to abandon one child up and next to strangers to keep them alive. When I heard the story, I knew I had to fictionalize it somehow. That's the story of Trần Diệu Lan. The incredible thing is that when the book was published, so many Vietnamese have contacted me and said, "Our family went through a similar thing." There are so many people who had to walk hundreds of kilometers during these atrocities to be able to survive. We shared so much of the community trauma, of this trauma that need to be talked about, that need to be discussed.

Bethanne: I don't like the reason that they wanted to tell their stories, but I love that you brought up the thing that being surprising was hearing from these people, hearing stories, collecting stories. That's really powerful. It's material for historical fiction, but it's also a reason

for writing this kind of literary fiction and that's amazing Quế Mai. Thank you. Jonathan, that makes me think about something for *The Great Mistake*.

There are so many different angles to approach, but one of the quite interesting things I think in *The Great Mistake* is in the braided narrative if you will, one of the places and its people we learn about is a brothel, a very upscale brothel. I wondered about what was surprising to you about researching an establishment like that, and that, I don't even want to call it an underworld. It was just part of life, but it was certainly not part of the drawing-room business dealing, high-finance life. It was a different aspect.

Jonathan: That took me by surprise too and was a interesting thing in the research that I was trying to reinvestigate why this murder had taken place of Andrew Haswell Green. He was shot by a man named Cornelius Williams. Then it turned out that Cornelius Williams was in love with a woman named Bessie Davis and her real name was Hannah Elias, but she went by the Bessie Davis. There are all these little mistakes where when you're writing a book called *The Great Mistake*, I come rubbish at titles but when I pay attention, I'm like, "I better lookout for stuff that connects to that title.

There are all these little mistakes and miscommunications including-- it's not much of a spoiler. He was shot in a case of mistaken identity because Cornelius Williams was actually, it turns out he'd looked up. He knew that there was a Green who'd been involved with Hannah Elias and he looked him up in the phone book and picked the wrong Green and shot the wrong green. She was a fascinating character because she became known as the richest Black woman in America in the 1880s and she ran this central park adjacent brothel that was frequented by a lot of the politicians of the day.

There were little snippets of interviews from her from when the scandal broke. She's not a huge part of the book but in these interviews, she bought so much humor to the situation. There was this sense that a white guy was dead and she was the only one who wasn't really phased by it. She was like, "Well, you should see some of the things that I've seen in the last few years." Also, just another surprise just in all of the research I suppose was, I was reminding myself constantly that whenever I came across anything that was humorous, anything that made me laugh, that's a huge thing when you are looking at the past somehow I found.

Maybe it connects to Kaitlyn's point about trying not to be stayed. The flip of it it's when you find something that makes you laugh in history, I think it reminds you that there are patterns of mistakes and errors and misunderstandings and things like that that are funny throughout the ages. There was a bunch of board minutes from the New York city board of education that I spent a lot of time going through.

I was on day three of reading these really boring board minutes that I felt like I needed to read and there was a line at the end of one of the sets of board minutes that said, "A moving tribute was also paid by the chair of the board today to Alderman Lucas who died last week after lighting a firework in the mistaken belief that it was a scar."

[laughter]

Jonathan: I was like, there are just those moments and it's bad luck for Alderman Luca's family but these little moments of joy that leap off the page in research sometimes. I tried to make some space for those too.

Bethanne: We were talking about tweets earlier and when you're talking to me, tweets come up. I saw something about a log. Maybe it was Ellis Island, maybe it was somewhere else but it was basically a log of names and birth dates and then occupations and this particular one on Twitter shows a woman's name, she's maybe 18 years old and under occupation, it says, "Does as she pleases." I thought they're squad goals. [laughs] There are little bits everywhere that even if they're not flat-out humor, they can remind us that life has a lot of humor in it.

I think I see that in all of your books. I want to remind everyone who is with us that there is plenty of time for questions so please ask them. Since we only have a couple right now, I'm going to go on and ask a few more questions since we have a little time. I have these authors, my captives on Zoom. Who are your greatest influences, each of you, especially when it comes to historical fiction? You can tell me that you love this author or that author but if it's someone who also writes literary fiction of the historical type I'd love to hear about that. Influences, anyone? Jonathan, you start this time, don't make Kaitlyn get to it.

[laughter]

Jonathan: My mind always goes completely blank even though I think you warned us that this question might be coming but I love this doctoral ragtime, that mischievous blending of fact and fiction and that historical work. I always read Zadie Smith's work and even though she's rarely spoken about as a historical novelist even though I think her next book is set deep history. I think she always peels back history in fascinating ways.

Tony Morrison's *Jazz* is just obviously a brilliant look at Harlem history that improvises the spaces between the past and the present in really cool ways. I read a lot of, Joseph Mitchell's old *New Yorker* profiles as well, which also turn out to be as much fiction as they are fact. There's something in the tone of those that spoke to me when I was trying to work on this book

Bethanne: *Up at the Old Hotel* is just so marvelous. Love Joseph Mitchell. How about you Kaitlyn?

Kaitlyn: Well, for this book, I was really trying to think of historical fiction books that do really interesting things around language. *Coming Through Slaughter* was really important to read. That book does such sort of just marvelous things of just pulling you really into a world. *True History of the Kelly Gang* does the same. That's a book where Peter Carey is using just the complete alien nature reading language from the past to really-- It almost pushes you out at first and then all of a sudden you're in this voice that is just remarkable and so different from anything else.

Then I was also trying to read books that came out a long time ago but are set in an era different from the authors. I think I talked about this with you in our interview, but *Age of Innocence* is to me, a classic historical fiction novel. I don't think many people think of it that way, but Wharton was writing about a time 40 years before when she was writing and publishing it. I've tried to think of those books that are clearly set away from the author's time period but for whatever reason, we don't necessarily think of them as historical fiction or we think of them just as this is the world and we're in it doesn't necessarily have those expectations around it.

Bethanne: Well, and so much of what we consider great literature, we don't think of it as historical fiction because we don't keep timelines in our heads very well. Do we? The *Hunchback of Notre Dame* is set in the 15th century and Hugo of course was squarely living in

the 19th but we don't think of that. That's another challenge I think when we're talking about influences because so many writers from the past just historical fiction was it for them. They were just naturally writing about the past. They moved back and forth.

Historical fiction also, Quế Mai, this is where I come to you and your influences. Think of, there is Chinese historical writing going back thousands of years. In Japan, *Tale of Genji* can be considered historical. I am not cool enough to know the best historical novel writing in Vietnam, but I'm going to learn more from you. Tell us, Quế Mai, about some of your influences, whether they are available in English or not, because who knows what will come next in translation.

Quế Mai: Thank you so much, Beth Ann. For me, the poets of Vietnam actually are the ones who are inspirational to me. The poets will tell great historical fiction via their poetry. For example, you may check out Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều* which has been translated into English. Nguyễn Du wrote *The Tale of Kiều* which documents the life of this woman named Kiều in an epic poem of 3254 verses-

Bethanne: Oh my goodness.

Quế Mai: -in the traditional Vietnamese format, like six by eight. It's the greatest work of literature for Vietnamese people and a lot of Vietnamese know this book by heart and we tell our fortune with this book.

Bethanne: Really?

Quế Mai: Yes. It's a part of our culture. The two historical fiction writers whom I really love, Bảo Ninh who wrote *The Sorrow of war*. Bảo Ninh was a soldier for the northern Vietnamese army. Most of the combats in his unit died. He went through so much, and he wrote this book, *The Sorrow of War* which was banned in Vietnam at first because the government said, "There was no sorrow, we won the war." He was the first writer from North Vietnam to write about the trauma of war. The book, when it was allowed to be published in Vietnam, they changed the title to *The Fate of Love*. From *The Sorrow of War* to *The Fate of Love*, because there's a love story in the novel.

Bethanne: Is that available in English?

Quế Mai: Yes, *The Sorrow of War* is one of the top books on Vietnam.

Bethanne: I am definitely going to be looking that one up myself. Absolutely. This is great. I know we have a couple more questions, but there are a couple more things I wanted to ask. I think we have just a few minutes, but before I do that, let's answer the questions so I make sure we don't run out of time. Elizabeth McLean asks you, Quế Mai, you say the war lives in the consciousness of your people. Will there be a follow-up to *The Mountain Sing?* What lives have your protagonist built in post-war Vietnam? Where are they now?

Quế Mai: Oh, thank you, Elizabeth. Elizabeth McLean is a great novelist host from Canada. Hi Elizabeth, and thank you to all our audience members who are joining us from all around the world. I think the magical thing about Zoom is that we can have people from everywhere so thank you for joining us today. Many readers have wanted to know what happened to a few people from the novel because like the Vietnam War, we haven't resolved many things. The Vietnamese history, there are still so many things unburied.

For example, there are still people who are missing from the book. I think at the moment, I want to imagine the lives of those characters, maybe one day I write a sequel I don't know yet, but at the moment I feel like there are so much of Vietnamese history I want to know. Like Jonathan said before, you either write what or what you want to know. There's so much I want to learn and I want to research. For example, one of the topics I want to research into is human trafficking because Vietnam is one of the destination countries for human trafficking. So many Vietnamese women are trafficked for prostitution every year, for exploitation of labor as well.

You may have heard about this terrible situation when many Vietnamese died in the back of a truck in the UK when they were being trafficked. It's happening every day and it has serious implications. Because I work on human trafficking a while ago and I want to go back and research about it. Thank you so much, Elizabeth.

Bethanne: I really hope you do. Thank you, Elizabeth, for that question. I want to make a recommendation of my own. I looked up a definition of historical fiction before we started tonight and basically, it's 25 years give or take. People are doing all kinds of things. One book that I read last year came out in October 2021 that I think is a marvelous example of historical fiction. The kind we're talking about is by the Finnish Author Sofi Oksanen. Actually, she's Estonia Finnish. She wrote a book called *Dog Park* that is set in Ukraine. It's about Russian trafficking in Ukraine and Estonia.

It's a very powerful book. It is because it's set in the '90s. It is historical fiction, but it comes a little bit more into present day. That's a recommendation for everyone. We have another question from Alicia Rossano who asks a very long time ago, a lecture I heard described historical fiction as inherently contradictory, meaning history and fiction perhaps. Do you think of your writing and this is for all our panelists, as in this in-between space of fiction and nonfiction. How does this understanding affect the way you approach different projects?

I just want to say, that's a great question. I hope you will all answer it. Jonathan said something a few minutes ago that was very interesting about Joseph Mitchell and his writing. I thought some writing has the historical approach and the fictional approach. Some historical fiction is entirely fictional. It's a very hard thing to answer but I look forward to hearing what each of you have to say about that. Kaitlyn, anything about being in that space between history and fiction?

Kaitlyn: I'm trying to think of the best way to answer it because I feel like the two are so closely aligned for me. I feel like so many historians talk about working and inventing and elaborating on the silences and archives. For me, many ways fiction in history are doing very similar work, especially when you're talking about trying to uncover histories of marginalized people or people who are usually left out of general greater historical narratives.

I feel like the two words are so closely aligned in my mind, which feels like a strange thing to say because I feel like so much of history as well, I don't know, I don't want to discount from the real work that historians do of establishing facts and stuff, but this idea of having to create a narrative out of these very different shards of information that you have feels very similar to fiction for me.

Bethanne: Quế Mai?

Quế Mai: That's a great question, Alicia. I think that job of a novelist is to plant a tree. I think the foundation of our work, the garden on which we plant a tree is from our nonfiction itself I think. We gather information about real-life events about history, about the lives of people in

the past, so that we build the foundation for our garden. With our creative techniques, we build out trees, we use our plot, our imagination, our narrative, our voices. We build the trunk and the branches, and it leads to our tree.

I think readers have a great role in the development of historical fiction. It's the interaction of the readers, the participation of the readers that give the flowers and fruit to the tree because without readers, there's no literature. I think that there's something in between there and I want to talk about this book by Kim Thúy who is a Vietnamese Canadian writer. Her new book called *EM* is a mix of fiction and nonfiction. It's a short book, but it's about the history of Vietnam from the French occupation to current day. She has many statistics in there that read exactly like nonfiction but this is a book of fiction, as well.

Also, Ocean Vuong *On Earth We*'re *Briefly Gorgeous*, even though this is a book of fiction, but it's also a mix of memo, nonfiction. It's really interesting. I think this is a form which is being developed and employed much more. I love to see that. I love to see the creativity and how we have no border anymore. We can reach all the borders, we can erase all the limitations and be free with our creativity and our imagination.

Bethanne: I want to mention, Quế Mai, that *EM* it was recently nominated for a PEN International Books in Translation Awards. That's very exciting. We should all be looking out for it. Jonathan, I'll just ask you for your response. In a moment, I'm going to let everyone go back to life, real life, not historical life.

Jonathan: It's an interesting question, isn't it? I agree with everything everyone said. I think there's a sense in which it's part of the fun or the interest that we probably all have in historical fiction is that there are ways in which the past is as much a work of imagination as the future and there's also interesting things to peel back in terms of the beauties and dangers of narrative. The worst things that have happened in American history were acts of narrative imagination, sometimes horrible acts that someone came up with. Twisting of stories or suppressions of imagination or distortions of the truth or of people's individual truths in free speech.

The epigraph I have to the novel is a Novalis quote, which goes along the lines of novels arise from the shortcomings of history. I think there is something in the novelist being able to show you not just what happened, but how it felt. I think great biographers do that too, of course. One historian said to me at an event that he feels that history arises from the shortcomings of novels and that might be true too.

Bethanne: That is the perfect way to end our panel on storied history. Thank you, Kaitlyn Greenidge, Jonathan Lee, and Quế Mai for your time and patience this evening and for all of the responses you've given. I think we've all learned a lot and thank you to our audience. I am going to turn things over to Shahenda Helmy, our PEN/Faulkner Programs Director for a few words at the end. Thank you, Shahenda for being here to say goodbye to everyone.

Shahenda: Thank you so much, Beth Anne for that introduction and for leading tonight's conversation so beautifully. You're absolutely right, we learned so much. Thank you to our amazing panelists for joining us from quite literally all over the world tonight. We didn't mention it explicitly but Quế Mai is actually here joining us from Kyrgyzstan where it is currently tomorrow morning. Thank you all, Kaitlyn, Jonathan, Quế Mai, it really means the

world to us to have you here and of course, a huge thanks to you, our audience at the other end of the screen for engaging with us through your time and your thoughtful questions.

If you enjoyed tonight's program, we hope you'll consider making a donation to PEN/Faulkner using the link we'll drop in the chat shortly. Any amount you give will help us to continue to provide high-quality literary programs like tonight's literary conversations, as well as through our awards programs and our education programs year-round. You can learn more about PEN/Faulkner's work by visiting our website at penfaulkner.org and by following us on social media. Once again, thank you all for being a part of our literary family and we hope to see you all again soon. Have a good night everyone.

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