

Literary Conversation: CHOICE

September 14, 2022

Bethanne Patrick: Hello everyone. Welcome to PEN/Faulkner's first literary conversation of the season, Choice. My name is Bethanne Patrick. I'm the programs committee chair at the [PEN/Faulkner Foundation](#) and I'm so excited to have you here with us tonight. For those of you joining us for the first time, what you should know about PEN/Faulkner is that we are a nonprofit literary foundation based in Washington DC, with a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire individuals and communities.

We fulfill our mission by administering three national literary awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, and the PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion Award, as well as through our education programs, which bring free books and author visits to DC public and public charter schools and our literary conversation series, which starts its new season tonight. A couple of notes about this evening's webinar. We're providing live captions tonight. You can toggle them on and off using the CC button at the bottom of your screen.

There will be a short Q&A session at the end of the event, so please submit your questions, you can start now using the Q&A button also at the bottom of your screen. We'll do our best to get to all of them in the time we have. You should also know that you can upvote questions and so if you see something from someone else that you really think is terrific, give it a little lift. We're very proud to have adopted a pay what you will model for our literary conversations in order to increase accessibility to our programs during these tough times.

It's time to get this conversation started and we're so honored to have some incredible folks joining us tonight. I'm going to introduce them in alphabetical order. Elisa Albert our moderator is the author of [Human Blues](#), *After Birth*, *The Book of Dahlia*, *How this Night is Different*, and editor of the anthology, *Freud's Blind Spot*. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Time*, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *n+1*, *Bennington Review*, *Tin House*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Literary Review*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere. She lives in upstate New York.

R. O. Kwon's nationally bestselling first novel [The Incendiaries](#) is being translated into seven languages and was named the best book of the year by over 40 publications. *The Incendiaries* was a finalist for the national book critic circle, John Leonard Award, and the Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum Prize as well as five other prizes. Kwon and Garth Greenwell co-edited the bestselling anthology, *Kink*, recipient of the inaugural Joy Award, and a *New York Times* Notable Book.

Joanne Ramos was born in the Philippines and moved to Wisconsin when she was six. She graduated with a BA from Princeton University after working in investment banking and private equity investing. She became a staff writer at the economist. She currently serves on the board of the Moth and lives in New York City with her family. [The Farm](#), her debut novel is a national bestseller and has been chosen by

over 50 media outlets in America and abroad as a must-read from 2019. *The Farm* was long-listed for the Center for Fiction's 2019 First Novel Prize.

Leni Zumas was a finalist for the 2021 John Dos Passos Prize for literature. Her best-selling novel [Red Clocks](#) won the Oregon Book Award and was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction and the Neukom Award for Speculative Fiction. She lives in Oregon and teaches at Portland State University. With that, I have the great pleasure of turning this over to Elisa Albert, who will introduce our panelists and get all of our discussion started. Thank you, Elisa.

Elisa Albert: Thank you, Bethanne. Welcome, everyone. It's such a pleasure to be here. Thank you to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for having us. Joanne, Reese, Leni. I have been immersed in your worlds for the past couple of weeks in a very unusual way. I don't think I've ever read three novels concurrently, like in tandem, the way that I've been reading yours. They've been very, very front and center in conversation in my mind. I've picked up one, read 10, 20, 50 pages, put it down, picked up another, round and round and round. It's been a very singular experience for me and it lent a real immediacy to the way your themes and your voices and your stories, intersect and overlap.

It made all the issues therein not quite as theoretical as I think they would have felt if I had read them one at a time. It's been a great opportunity to experience a new way of consuming narrative. Thank you for that also PEN/Faulkner Foundation, it's been a great opportunity. Welcome. I'm curious to know Reese, Leni, and Joanne, if you have read each other, and if you've met each other across paths over the past few years, as your books have come into the world.

Joanne Ramos: I've actually met both Reese and Leni in 2019 when I was on book tour. Leni and I met in Calgary and we were in Pennsylvania, right Reese? I think it was one of the first events that I did for my book.

Elisa: You're familiar with each other's work.

Joanne: Nice to see everyone again.

Elisa: You're aware of how your work interacts with each other's to some degree. Interesting. I am new to all of you and I'm just thrilled to be here with you tonight. I want to start by just laying the groundwork and interrogating some very basic words and hopefully, we can keep this idea in our minds as we continue our discussion. Words like parent, freedom, love, mother, and choice. The last of which has been so often repeated, especially in the past few weeks and months that sometimes we have to press pause and remind ourselves of what it actually means as so often is the case when something is repeated too often.

These words can be both either verbs or nouns. When these words are verbs, they are active and they require inhabitation they don't exist on their own. They're not static objects, they're fluid, they're in motion and they have to be inhabited somehow. When these words are nouns, they are by definition, passive. What does it mean to be a parent? It can mean any number of things, not all of them very useful or positive or particularly meaningful, ditto mother or love or choice. What is choice in a

vacuum? What is choice as an abstract, as a passive thing that one is said to have or not have?

It's an important part of having this conversation I think that we keep interrogating these words and we keep questioning for ourselves and for each other and for our communal existence, what they are, what they mean, and how we're using them. That said, Joanne, I'm wondering if you can give us a snapshot of your novel.

Joanne: Sure. I would love to, just to give a little bit of context, *The Farm*, the place Golden Oaks, and it is the most luxurious spa that you've ever imagined. It's a place where the women partaking in the organic food, the massages the best doctors, they're all women who are hired to carry the babies of the richest people in the world. In this excerpt, Jane is a young Filipino mom who's left her own baby daughter at home to take a job at this facility. The reason she's doing it and it is her choice but to Elisa's point, I guess we have to question what that really means.

It's her first day on this job and she's doing it because you can make a ton of money, as long as you deliver a healthy baby for the billionaire to hire you. This is Jane's first day on the job. Also, Mae Yu will be mentioned is the Asian American woman who runs the place. "Right wrist please, sleeves up," says the coordinator. It is Jane's first day. Her interview at Golden Oaks was only six weeks ago, but in that time, everything has changed. An unknown baby lies in her stomach, and she is a hundred miles away from Amalia, surrounded by strangers.

The smiling woman who greeted her in the Dorm's lobby this morning took not only her suitcase and wallet but her cell phone, so Jane has no sense at the time, whether she has been at Golden Oaks for one hour or seven. Jane rolls up her sleeve and extends her arm wondering if she's getting another shot and why, since she is already pregnant. The coordinator straps a bracelet onto Jane's wrist, rubber, or at least rubbery-looking, and pushes a button that makes its thin, rectangular screen light up. "This is a WellBand, custom-made for us. I gave you red because it was just Valentine's Day."

Jane stares at it. Mrs. Carter used to wear something similar, a circle of blue plastic, like a child's toy that looked strange next to her diamond tennis bracelet. The gleaming ovals of her nails. "It tracks your activity levels, try jumping." Jane begins to jump. "See?" The coordinator angles the bracelet's face towards Jane. The green zeros that had once filled the screen have been replaced by orange numbers that climb steadily as Jane hops, growing short of breath, "You can stop," says the coordinator, but in a friendly way.

She holds Jane's wrist and guides the bracelet over a reader, attached to a laptop until the reader blinks. "There, now you're synced up with our data management team. Let's say your heart rate spikes. This happens. It's usually no biggie, but it can also signal some underlying irregularity in your heart, pregnancy being a strain on your TikToker," the coordinator, Carla pauses, waiting for the severity of this possibility to set in. "we'll know immediately and can whisk you in to see the nurse or if you're not getting enough exercise, we'll have Hannah all over it." Carla grants, "all over you."

"Hannah?" "She's our wellness coordinator. Oh, you'll get to know her real well." Carla winks at Jane. She runs through a tutorial of the WellBand, it's various monitors, timers, the alarm and snooze, and panic buttons, the GPS locator, calendar alerts. How to receive announcements. "How do you like your clothes." Carla's eyes wick over Jane, head to toe, back up again. Jane feels her face grow hot. In truth, she has never worn clothes so thin and so soft. Just this morning in her winter coat, she was freezing, but here, in clothes light as air, Jane is warm. Jane says so to Carla. "Oh, cashmere," Carla answers matter of factly, "Golden Oaks isn't skimp. That's for sure."

There's a knock on the open door. "Hi, Jane." Says Ms. Yu. "Oh, hello, Ms. Yu." Jane jumps to her feet. "Please sit. I just wanted to make sure you're settling in." Ms. Yu takes a seat on the bench next to Jane. "How's the morning sickness? Is your room okay? Did you meet Reagan?" "I feel okay. Only a little tired." Jane answers. "The room is beautiful, so are the clothes. I have not yet met my roommate." Ms. Yu frowns slightly. "But," Jane says quickly, not meaning to get her roommate into trouble. "I had to check in with the nurse and the orientation. I've been busy."

Ms. Yu's face relaxes. She places a hand on Jane's hand. "I'm guessing Reagan was just tied up. She'll be around soon, I think. This is your new home. We want to help you feel at home." At the word home, Jane's throat tightens. She wonders what Amalia is doing. Whether she notices her mother is gone. As if sensing Jane's thoughts, Ms. Yu asks, "How's Amalia? Was the goodbye hard?" Jane is pierced by gratitude that Ms. Yu who is so busy remembers Amalia's name. She shifts her gaze to the wall.

"It was fine. Amalia's almost seven months now. She's a big girl, and she has my cousin." "She's in good hands then." Ms. Yu's voice is kind. Jane still does not trust herself to face Ms. Yu. "I know, you know our policy Jane, which is that we don't allow visitors, and we don't allow hosts offsite unless at the request of a client" Ms. Yu leans close to whisper. "But I think we can convince your client to let Amalia come see you." "Really." Jane blats. Ms. Yu puts a finger to her lips and smiles. She asks Jane if she's ready for lunch and when Jane confesses she was too nervous this morning to eat, leads her to the dining hall.

Jane trails several steps behind, wiggling her toes in her new fur-lined moccasins, a tentative sense of wellbeing creeping over her. "Do you think you'll feel at home here?" Ms. Yu asks. She pushes the dining room door open with her shoulder. "Oh yes." Says Jane, and she means it.

Elisa: Thank you, Bravo. What a page-turner you wrote, and so densely populated with so many interesting people at such cross purposes. Really loved it. The fact that the farm probably doesn't exist right now yet, which I find hard to believe. I feel like it probably does, and we don't know about it. The commodification aspect is already here. It's fully here. This is not outlandish at all. Can you talk a little bit about where the idea came from and how it germinated, for lack of a better term, in you? The creative process and reproductive process, parallel metaphor issue is inescapable, but we'll do our best within it.

Joanne: There were questions that I was interested in exploring, but I couldn't quite find a way into them. It was everything from motherhood. I was a new mother and I had the privilege of being able to hire someone to help me care for my baby. That person was from the Philippines. I'm also from the Philippines, I was born there. To some degree, it was trying to imagine myself into our nanny's life, where she's taking care of my kids, and she left her kids. Her kids were actually in Queens, but she never saw them because she worked so much.

I met so many other people, many of whom I now-- not many, but let's say half a dozen, I now consider friends who are domestic workers. The only Filipinos I knew at that time that I was intimate with, that I saw on a daily basis were domestic workers. Yet I was also a Filipino who's been called American dream a million times in my life. It was these ideas of meritocracy and what that means, motherhood, freedom, free choice, free will. What that really means in a capitalistic society. I wanted to explore that, and I just couldn't find my way in.

I was writing all these very bad stories about dog walkers with rich clients, terrible stuff, but I just couldn't get in until I read a little article about a surrogacy facility in India. These things exist or they did exist. It's now banned in India and Thailand because of corruption and people leaving babies there when they weren't perfect. The only thing I did, and this is why it was funny to me in a way that all the articles would say it was dystopian. I didn't set out to write a dystopia. I set out to write a realistic story based on a real thing that happened, and all I did was I amped it and I made it luxury.

Being someone who was in banking and having a certain life, that's not so far off. You walked on the streets of New York, there's \$3,000 strollers zooming by and people trying to give their kids an edge. The only thing I did is I made that edge start in utero by hiring women, not just to care for your babies from the Philippines and other places, but to actually carry the baby.

Elisa: That's not dystopian either. That's very much here. You made it super highly organized and you turned it into a spa, which if *The Farm* did exist today in the Hudson Valley an hour South of where I live in the crap hole, rust belt of upstate. I don't think we'd know about it. They wouldn't be advertising it. The ultra-wealthy who do outsource pregnancy domestically at least are for sure taking primo care of their vessels, incubators, surrogates, call them what you will. Is it a corporate scheme? We don't know.

Joanne: I don't think it is yet, but again, the idea is just an inch from reality, I think. Especially now.

Elisa: Half an inch. There's a passage on page 48 in my copy. I won't make you read it, but the character Reagan who's a pretty privileged White girl who opts to do this as an F you to her class-obsessed, money-obsessed, status-obsessed father because she doesn't want to just be like a trust fund kid. She wants to do something important on her own. She's not doing it out of necessity. She's confused about the ethics and the moral superiority of it. It could be that one party has no other options. The exchange for that one party might not be a good deal, but only the best choice

among a bunch of choices that are all total crap. You hit on that so many times in this book.

Joanne: My dad and I used to argue about-- my dad, look, he has passed away. He was a good man. We disagreed deeply about politics. He loved Ronald Reagan. He made it in America. He was a traveling salesman, but to him, and he did, he made it in America. He sent us to good colleges. We would fight all the time at the kitchen table about this idea of free trade, free choice, free will within capitalism. One of the basic tenants of economics is that every free trade is made freely because the two parties leave better off, it's mutually beneficial.

If so, why would Jane go to the farm if it didn't make her better off too? That is one of the reasons why I always disagreed with the portrayal of the book or my book as *The Handmaid's Tale* of 2019. My English publisher did this whole subway thing with seven subways with these 10-foot ads quoting that from some review. *The Handmaid's Tale*, you were at gunpoint, you had to carry. These women made the choice. What does that mean when the power between those two parties is so unbalanced? I think you can pick out those transactions throughout our society. To me, that was more interesting to explore.

Elisa: The hierarchies of power and class and money and privilege in your book are also so beautifully drawn and starkly portrayed an understandable in a way that I don't think the headlines make possible. This is why narrative matters because we can understand people's quandaries and choices or lack thereof so much more interestingly, I think. With so much more nuanced and so much more important when we actually know their stories. Anyone ever heard of the privilege walk? Do you know what that is? Maybe somebody can put it in the chat. It's a cool exercise.

Joanne: I've heard of it. My kids did in school I think.

Elisa: Any age, any level and it opens up interesting discussions about privilege and about power and about oppression and about hierarchies of complicity and grievance. It's a really fascinating exercise. I thought about it more than once while I was reading *The Farm*. One of the question, are you aware of the farm that actually exists? It's like Ina May Gaskin's farm in Tennessee. Was that any wink, wink?

Joanne: No, mine really was based on the one that I read about in India and Thailand. Of course, I'm sure you guys read once there was a war in Ukraine. This is a huge business in Ukraine. There were all these babies stuck in Ukraine once the war happened. Then just out of central casting, the biggest company there that does this is called Biotechs Com. I just thought it was really sci-fi and creepy. I thought they had to hide a little bit more what they were doing.

Elisa: Truth is stranger than fiction sometimes, isn't it? The Farm is a birthing center in Tennessee, a very well-known birthing center, run by an elder midwife who was fundamental in bringing midwifery back from the brink of extinction, basically, in the '60s and '70s. People travel there, people who live in states where it's not legal to have a baby outside of a hospital if you want to. It's not legal to practice midwifery in the home. It's constantly changing. I know somebody who lived in Illinois, they had to

leave the state to have their baby the way they wanted to outside of an institution. People travel to the farm. It's an interesting little echo.

The other question that I just wonder if you could touch briefly on is about this idea of dirty work. Birthing, baby care, child care, house cleaning, the people with proximity to the dirty work, the bodies, the shit, the food, the elemental parts of living in a body, and how that functions in your novel and how that relates to the commodification of human life.

Joanne: I think those are traditionally, and historically jobs of women. Everything that women do in the home is invisible. In a society that puts a value on you and your work based on the salary you make, of course, it's overlooked. It's overlooked until it's outsourced is the reality. I know women who work full-time as mothers and I know mothers who don't work. What does that even mean that they don't work? They're at home taking care of their kids. My mother didn't work, she had four of us. She was new to this country.

She completely worked. It's just that we don't see it and it's because women have always done those roles. If somehow was reversed, we would care and we'd put a monetary value on it that we probably can't even imagine, but I think you hit the nail right on the head with that, that it's women's work that is unseen.

Elisa: Five years ago, there was an Olympiad, an athlete, I forget who it was, but it was a man and he was praised in the media. He was babysitting his kid. He couldn't come to something, he was-- it was like, "No, that's called being a parent. [chuckles] You're not babysitting your kid." Anyway. Thank you and pause. Leni, I wonder if you will grace us with an excerpt.

Leni Zumas: Sure. Before I read, I just want to say I'm so appreciative of this conversation so far and Joanne, your scrutiny of the economics and class and race foundations underneath a lot of the narratives that we have around motherhood and care and labor. That's why I think I'm also really grateful Elisa, you brought up to interrogate these terms like choice because that was for me one of the biggest questions I had going into writing *Red Clocks* was why, for myself, Leni Zumas, why did I want to become a mother? Why? Where did that desire come from? I'm really interested even beyond parenthood.

In any choices we make, and the desires we have, so often desire is centralized as something just like, "I want that. That's just what I want for my life," but where do those desires come from? What inherited narratives have been made so invisible, that we come to think, "Oh, of course, I want to get married." That was not my personal desire, but I think for a lot of people, that sense of, "If I have a life partner, I'll be happier." Just that individual, the pushing away of anything else about money and race and gender that goes into that choice. Anyway, I really appreciate that, you guys.

I'm going to read a little bit from *Red Clocks*, which is a book that takes place in America where abortion has been made illegal and various kinds of criminalization of doctors or people seeking abortions and restriction of adoption to people who are married, et cetera. This passage I'm going to read gives a sense of the perspective

from one of the characters of almost waking up into this world. She lives by the sea, a vast dark luminous perilous sea, floors white with sailors' bones, tides stronger than any human effort. Sea stacks sleep like tiny mountains in the waves.

She loves the sheer fact of how many millions of creatures the water holds—microscopic and gargantuan, alive and long dead. In eyeshot of such a sea, one can pretend things are fine at first. Notice only the cares within reach. Coyotes on Main Street fundraising for lighthouse repairs. It's why she liked this country of pointed firs, at first: how easily here she could forget the hurtling world. While she was hiding out in a rainy Arcadia, they closed the women's health clinics that couldn't afford mandated renovations. They prohibited second-trimester abortions.

They required women to wait ten days before the procedure and to complete a lengthy online tutorial on fetal pain thresholds and to read about celebrities whose mothers had planned to abort them. They started talking about this thing called the Personhood Amendment, which for years had been a fringe idea, a farce. When Congress proposed the 28th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and it was sent to the states for a vote, she wrote emails to her representatives. Marched in protests in Salem and Portland. Donated to Planned Parenthood. But she wasn't all that worried.

It had to be political theater, she thought, a flexing of muscle by the conservative-controlled House and Senate in league with a fetus-loving new president. Thirty-nine states voted to ratify. A three-quarters majority. She watched the computer screen splashed with this news, thought of the signs at the rallies, "Keep your rosaries off my ovaries, think outside my box," and the online petitions, the celebrity op-eds. She couldn't believe the Personhood Amendment had become real with all these citizens so against it. Which the disbelief was ridiculous. She knew, it was her job as a teacher of history to know, how many horrors are legitimated in public daylight, against the will of most of the people.

Elisa: Damn, when did you write that?

Leni: I wrote this before Trump was elected. That particular sequence, I remember thinking after he got elected, I'm like, "Do I need to cut this?" I wasn't really sure how the manuscript was—it had found a publisher before the election, but I was still revising it. I started working on the book in 2010 and when in my research, I heard about things like the Personhood Amendment. Everything in the book comes from some actual precedent, Paul Ryan, or Mike Pence, politicians who were already proposing these things.

Again, to me, they seemed so fringe that they were just like these interesting little horrors hanging out outside the-- that was very much not true as we all have learned. When I was writing it, that was the situation.

Elisa: Did you freak yourself out a little bit as things unfolded? Were you tweaking? It's a little uncanny.

Leni: I think I was so depressed after Trump's election when I was doing some of the revisions on this book that I felt more like that despair than-- I wasn't actually thinking

as much about my manuscript. It almost made me want to not think about my manuscript. That question has, of course, come up since it was published and since all the rights that are being taken away from people in recent months and years. That idea of fiction being oppression same with the question around Joanne's novel, where is the farm actually happening? I think for all three of our books, there are ways in which, and for many other novelists, that future is already here. The future that we're writing about is contained but-

Elisa: You were paying attention.

Leni: -it was horrible.

Elisa: You were paying attention the whole time and you pulled a thread and current events for something very eerily similar out, but it's not like you invented it, to begin with. This was in the air, this was in the water. This has been happening for a really long time. It brings to mind another line I love from your novel, Joanne, from page 88 and it's Reagan's lost mother. It's a throwaway line, not in the current narrative. It's like a flashback. "If you don't notice, you can't care and you won't do anything that matters."

She's urging her daughter to be somebody who looks around the world and notices things and isn't complacent and doesn't assume that, whatever, it's all just a backdrop. That what goes on around you is real and matters. You have to take note if you hope to make anything or do anything or say anything or be of any help to anyone. I think that's really profound idea.

Leni: That really speaks to something you brought up earlier, the idea about things not being just theoretical because I do think that both the reading of-- probably more than it, the reading of but the writing of fiction. These are acts of paying attention and giving a certain quality of attention to what it is like to be in a body, to be in a body that has been gendered and racialized, and marginalized in certain ways in the world, but centering that body. What does that actually feel like is something I think some fiction does really well. I'm hard put to think of any other media that can do that in the way that fiction can because of the granular level of detail. Anyway, it's becoming untheoretical.

Joanne: Sorry. Can I just say something to piggyback on what Leni said because I've been thinking about along the lines of what you were just saying, Leni in that, in this moment when politics has become so dire and it feels so important, at least I, because I've been struggling with my second book, I thought, "Is this what I should be doing? I'm already politically active, but should I be doing that and not making up stories?" To your point, I think the other reason, in addition to yours, why fiction is so powerful is that it is by its definition made up.

I think people will come to books with an openness. They're disarmed because it's a leap of faith. To pick up a book that's made up, you're always taking that leap of faith anyway. I feel like I'm never honestly going to read a nonfiction book or a memoir by someone I disagree with politically. If I know that I disagree with them politically, I probably wouldn't pick that book up. I would pick up almost every book that is

supposed to be a great book, and I will pick it up with an openness to just go along for the ride. It's just made up.

In doing that, maybe my mind will see something a little different. Maybe I'll change my mind a little bit. Maybe I'll get to know a body as you say, that I never in real life would want to know, but I learn to understand a bit because it's fiction, because it's not been partisan, because it's not-- I don't think I'm saying it well, but I do think, in a way, I've come around to believing that fiction really does matter. It's not like I totally gave up hope on it, but I went through some despair where I was like, "Maybe I should be doing something more helpful with my life." Anyway.

Elisa: If a novelist is doing their job, then a story about somebody with the most loathsome distant politics imaginable would be urgent and relevant. You say something to this end, Reese, that I want to get to in an interview that you did about your book. Let's pause this because this is an important point and we'll get back to it. I just want to quote Ezra Pound who came to mind even though he was an anti-Semite and he said, "Fiction is news that stays news."

I think he was right even though I disagree with him on some other things. Leni, I just want to talk a little bit more about *Red Clocks*. The voice of it, the sensibility, the tone of it is so striking and so unique. You have a very terse and ironic sense of humor in this book, and it suits the characters and the setting, and the quandaries therein so beautifully. Can you talk about how you landed on that very elemental tone?

Leni: I love that question. It's also so hard to answer because it's hard to observe oneself doing-- I find writing so difficult. Let me just say that I find writing so difficult that to even have a sense of what I'm doing while I'm doing it is really hard. One of the sources of humor, and maybe darker humor that I was coming into the writing of the book with was my own experience having a body that could not get pregnant and I wanted to get pregnant. I was dealing with a lot of infertility issues. I was just having these doctor's appointments where I would just start laughing because it was so gross.

I felt like I was in 1897. They'd be like, "When the uterus is corrupted--" There was all this language around the failure of bodies. If you can't get pregnant, then your body has failed at its most essential task. That was underlying so much of the medicalization of fertility treatments. I started writing this book as an essay because I was so angry about it and so sad and also I was like, "Why do I want to get pregnant? What the fuck am I doing?" It gave me a lot of time actually to-- I did end up getting pregnant and I have an almost 10-year-old son.

At the time, I was just thinking, "This is actually absurd." One of the narratives that I was really contending with was about the natural-- you mentioned midwifery. Also, I live in Portland, which is a place where there's a lot of different ways that people give birth and a lot of different ways that people care for kids. It's something I love about Portland. There's a lot of rhetoric of the natural like going back to the natural way to do things. I happen to have a body that nature was not on my side. My "natural capabilities" were not something to write home about.

I was starting from a place of great alienation from those sorts of narratives around motherhood and a lot of the-- it's the 21st century, but people will still say, "Oh, you'll know what to do because you're his mother." Like, "Really? How about we all help each other figure out what to do rather than isolate people in these lonelinesses where we're expected to actually figure out things because it should come natural to us?"

I guess to give an example, there is a scene early on where this character goes into her fertility doctor and he's dressed as Slash from Guns N' Roses because it's Halloween and he doesn't take off his sunglasses. She's there with her feet in the straps, and her vulva yawning at him and he has these sunglasses on. I remember when my mom read the book for the first time, she was like, "Why did you choose to do--" I was like, "That's actually the one thing that was taken directly from my life." That happened. There was a doctor in Portland who I really dislike to this day, who was wearing a leather vest and no shirt.

I'm like, "I'm actually having a really difficult experience here." Anyway, to answer your question, Elisa, I think I was trying to draw on that energy to get it out of myself and get it maybe into the book.

Elisa: It works. Spoiler. It's awesome. Pause, because we have so much more to talk about on that. Reese, will you share a piece of *The Incendiaries* with us, please?

R. O. Kwon: Thank you so much. Thank you to PEN/Faulkner for bringing us together for this conversation. It's really an honor to be here with writers whose work I admire so much. I'm going to read from *The Incendiaries* as my first novel. It's about a woman who gets involved with a group of fundamentalist Christians, and the group turns out to be a cult, and they end up bombing abortion clinics, healthcare clinics in the name of faith. Part of how I came to this book is that I grew up really Christian. So Christian that my life plan was going to was to become a pastor.

Then at 17, I left that faith. In some ways, I've just remained fascinated throughout my life by differences, by just core differences and what people believe and in how that affects how we live with one another. I'll just read from the first chapter. There's nothing else to know about it. I'll read very briefly. They'd have gathered on a rooftop in Noxhurst to watch the explosion. Platt Hall, I think, 11 floors up. I know his ego, and he'd have picked the tallest point he could. So often, I've imagined how they felt, waiting. With six minutes left, the slant light of dusk reddened the high old spires of the college, the level gables of its surrounding town.

They poured festive wine into big-bellied glasses. Hands shaking, they laughed. She would sit apart from this reveling group, cross-legged on the roof's west ledge. Three minutes to go, two, one. The Phipps building fell. Smoke plumed, the breath of God. Silence followed, then the group's shouts of triumph. Wine glasses clashed together, flashing martial light. He sang the first bars of a Jejah psalm. Others soon joined in. Carillon bells chimed, distant birds blowing white, strewn, like dandelion tufts, an outsize wish.

It must have been that John Leal came to her side. In his bare feet, he closed his arm around her shoulders. She flinched, looking up at him. I can imagine how he'd

have tightened his hold, telling her she'd done well, though, before long, it would be time to act again, to do a little more. But this is where I start having trouble, Phoebe. Buildings fell. People died. You once told me I hadn't even tried to understand. So, here I am, trying. I'll just stop there.

Elisa: Thank you. The piece of this interview, it's a Q&A that is printed in the back of your paperback, the edition I have, page 220. Do you happen to have it in front of you? I'd rather hear it in your voice than my own voice. [chuckles]

Reese: I don't only because I have the hardcover in front of me. [chuckles]

Elisa: Pardon me, if I read your own words to you. You say, "I know a lot of people are justifiably sick of being asked to empathize with the ideologues and bigots who want us dead, our rights taken, our bodies claimed as theirs, but some pro-life dogmatists truly do believe they're doing good. Some terrorists even, rigorously agnostic though I now am actively progressive as I strive to be, I can't forget the God wild girl I once was, the fanatic who believed that life starts at conception. Who believing this, could have prioritized the rights of unborn fetuses over those of living women.

Given this history, and with and despite my personal convictions, I wanted to portray both these worldviews without dismissing one side as being utterly beyond comprehension." Thank you. So crucial and so missing from so much of our discourse. Can you elaborate a little more on the process of writing and on the process of evolving as you have from that into this?

Reese: Yes, sure. Thank you. Oh, let's see. Part of how this book came about for me is that I volunteered very briefly at a planned parenthood as a patient escort. I was walking people back and forth just into the clinic past protestors. The protestors who were there that day, they were very visibly all Christian. Their signs were all about Jesus, et cetera, et cetera. Then as I was walking these people, I just experienced this nearly physical split in my body because I was like, "When I was 15, I did believe what these people believe. Now I so strongly believe the very opposite that I'm spending my Saturday morning doing this."

I think that was part of it. I don't know. I'm so sympathetic to the fatigue with being asked to empathize with people who truly want us dead and want our bodies, and who don't care for us. With that, I also do think that the tendency or a tendency to dismiss people who don't believe what-- I always have trouble generalizing. I know that my tendency to dismiss people who don't believe what I believe as monsters, as just beyond the pale of humanity really. It's very simple to think about people as monsters. It's very easy to think about people as monsters.

Once you start thinking of other people as monsters, it's also then possible to believe that one is not capable of being a monster, oneself. I think that part of having been so Christian, and really, I was an evangelical Christian. I was a shouting in warehouse rallies kind of Christian, trying to convert people at my high public school Christian. I think part of what that has left me with is a very severe distrust of certainty, so much so that even that statement sounds really suspicious to me.

Because if I'm just like, "Certainty is bad," then I'm like, "That's a really certain statement." [laughs] That was really long answer.

Elisa: Basically, you're Jewish now. Have you ever read the Sally Tisdale's essay from *Harper's* in the mid-'80s? It's online? It was published in *Harper's* as we do abortions here, but she wanted and republished it later in her own collection as *Fetus Dreams*. She writes about working as a nurse at an abortion clinic in Oregon for many years. It's a very straightforward essay. It just catalogs stuff that happens, like this kin of thing happens, and then this usually happens, and then this happens.

She doesn't share any opinions. They do 100 abortions a week at this clinic. Somebody's got to empty the bucket quite literally. What she said about this piece is that for years and years and years after it was published, she would get mail. Half of which said, "I'm pro-life, I'm anti-choice. Thank you so much for writing this piece. It's so important." The other half of which said, "I'm pro-choice. Thank you so much for writing this piece. It's so important that you wrote this piece," because she managed somehow to just narrate the experiences of people who need to terminate their pregnancies without any baggage, like, oh, from her. You can read the piece as whatever you want. It's a mirror. It's a really fascinating essay. It's really one of the best things I've ever read on abortion. I think you would find it really, really important. The other thing that the way you speak of this brings to mind is have you seen-- there was an essay published recently in the *New York Times* magazine by the writer Merritt Tierce.

She was a very religious Christian in her youth at Bible college. This piece was called *The Abortion I Did Not Have*. Highly recommended if somebody can throw that in the chat too. It speaks to these issues a lot. This idea that like belief is static and that anyone who's not the same as you is your enemy. It gets really, really sticky when you're a dynamic being with evolving lived experiences and ideas. How does that play out for your characters?

Reese: [laughs] Well, first of all, I love what you're saying about--oh, and that Merritt Tierce piece is so good. I was like trying to find her email address to tell her how amazing it was and I couldn't find it so I like gave up the hunt, but that piece is amazing and I will definitely look for that other piece. Thank you. Something that I think I was thinking a lot about when I was writing this book and something I think about a lot in general is I think I'm increasingly alarmed by Americans' tendencies too.

I'm unsure like lots of people in other countries too, but the country I know best is America. Our obsession with-- okay, again with the generalizing. Many people in this country want to-- are like, "I am a good person." I find that to be what you were saying about the verb versus the noun. I find that to be such a limiting point of view and honestly, one of our country's original sins if anything.

The idea that you're a good person, that means that anytime you run up against criticism or an idea that challenges your worldview, that means that if it doesn't sit with how you look at the world that means wait, then your sense of a good person is threatened. I feel as though, okay, so like with racism, with sexism, if you hurt

someone and you're like, I'm a good person. Regardless if you hurt them, that person doesn't care whether or not you're a good person really.

For them, they're hurt. I don't know, like an extreme example, if you drop a, "Why am I returning to a *Friends* episode?" I didn't maybe watch that much *Friends*. When somebody drops a knife on someone's foot and his toe gets chopped off. [laughs] He's not like, "Oh, that's a good person who chopped off by a toe." He just lost a toe and I wish that fewer people in our country were so attached to the static notion of I am a good person, therefore nothing I can do is bad, therefore I can't change.

Anyway, so with this book I was really interested in exploring really different parts of my own psyche in some ways split out. There's a character who the central narrator is somebody who falls in love with this woman, who gets involved with a cult. That woman also plays a large role in the book and she has her own. It's a version of what her own thoughts and the book is between three points of view.

I play around a little bit with the idea of point of view perspective. The third character is a cult leader who at least says that he has volunteered in China and working with North Korean refugees and says that he has spent time in a Gulag and so part of it is from his point of view.

Elisa: He's like seeing all these horrors, which then these like young, impressionable college-age kids are like, "Oh, like the horrors." There's something really seductive and perverse about that as it read to me.

Reese: Yes. Going back to the idea of certainty, I remember reading because I did a lot of research into cults, also to the history of reproductive rights in America. In cults and religions in general, I remember as an evangelical Christian learning that by college is when you really want to recruit people because high school and college are when people are the most likely to switch a faith, to join a faith.

I set the novel in college in part because of that and terrorist groups. Lots and lots of different kinds of terrorist groups like to recruit at colleges. It's a timeline like people are very much changing. It's a [unintelligible 00:56:59] time. A lot of people are also away from their hometowns, away from their families, just far, far, far more likely to want to belong to something. There's that. There's also John [unintelligible 00:57:15], a cult leader, part of what he offers is a version of certainty, and certainty can be tremendously appealing to so many people.

Elisa: Oh my God. Certainty's so easy. [[unintelligible 00:57:28] is just infinitely simpler.

Reese: It must just be like-

Elisa: Nuance is hard.

Reese: Should I wait [crosstalk]- - [laughs]

Elisa: Nuance is also endless. There's no endpoint. It's just like, can we just put it to bed? Can we just decide what's right and what's wrong and like all go have a beer? Nuance just doesn't leave any space for relaxing. [laughs] It's stressful having to

engage and engage and engage and deal with complexities. It's not for the faint of heart.

Reese: One of my favorite quotations is [unintelligible 00:58:12] said that he's on the side of the questions, which I love so much. I feel like that's something that in general fiction does offer. Novelists do tend to be on the side of the questions not the answers.

Elisa: Totally.

Reese: If we had answers, we'd probably do something else with our life. [laughs]

Elisa: We'd be journalists. No, journalists can be good at questions too. Good ones. Anybody is good at questions. That's the thing. No matter what your genre is, if you're not interested in the questions, you're just engaging a dead end. There's no life in it. It could be a memoir. It could be history. It could be journalism. It could be poetry. If it's not just a giant endless stream of questions. Why?

Joanne: Then you're writing *Atlas shrugged*. That's what it is. You're on a [unintelligible 00:59:09]. It's not right. There wasn't nuanced. It was one idea that she wanted to get out there anyways.

Elisa: Take burn.

Joanne: One person's opinion.

Elisa: Yes.

Reese: High schoolers love that book. Even high schoolers, who later are like, "Oh my God, what the fuck was I thinking?"

Joanne: That's right.

Elisa: That's right. Everybody's loving talking about *Dirty Dancing* and the penny abortion recently for good reason because it's like a really memorable moment for a lot of us in our coming of age and cultural assimilation, but remember the asshole waiter, Robbie, who hands baby Atlas [unintelligible 00:59:43] [laughs] and says "Read it, but return it I've got notes in the margin." Classic. Classic.

That brings us back around to empathy, which Reese you make such an important point about why we do what we do and what the value really is beyond entertainment because I think we're all also entertainers to some degree. We spin yarns, we want to get people's hearts and minds engaged. We want to make them laugh, we want to make them feel, we want to make them think, but it's that really unique way we can make people empathize in ways that they otherwise, maybe couldn't in the supermarket parking lot or wherever with somebody who's just really different.

Somebody who comes from someplace really different feels really differently, thinks really differently. It's a pretty special thing that we get to do. Go us. I wonder if you guys have any questions for each other. Anything that sparked for you that you want to go a little deeper on? While you think about it there's this little bit at the bottom of

page 91 in *Red Clocks* that you touched on briefly Leni. I just loved this piece about why the Biographer, as the character is known, Ro, wants children. Why does she want them really? Because Susan has them, her acquaintance? Because the Salem bookstore manager has them? Because she always vaguely assumed she would have them herself? Or does the desire come from some creaturely place, pre-civilized, some biological throb that floods her bloodways with the message, "Make more of yourself."

Great passage. Back again to this idea of desire too, that the difference between an unwanted pregnancy and a desperately wanted pregnancy, it's the same cluster of cells. In one case it needs to be rid, and in the other case there's quite literally no lengths to which a person might not go to get it. The only difference is desire. That's it. There's no other difference. Do you want it or do you not want it? It's the same entity. How bizarre is that?

Leni: The more attention we can pay to how all of us come to want what we want and to have certainty about things. I completely agree with what y'all have been saying about the solace in it. There's a real actual need that is met, I think, by someone saying, "This is the truth. You don't need to worry about what lies outside of this."

Earlier, Joanne, when you were talking about domestic labor and unpaid labor and work that is not recognized as work, I just think of all of the advertising power, and cultural narratives, and family narratives that go into this romanticizing being a homemaker, taking care of your kids and just feeding them the best things you can think of. *The Farm* is actually that idea that, okay, you'll just do everything you can to have the perfect baby. I think that kind of inculcation happens all the time, that if you just do the right set of things you will be happy.

Then to read stories about people who-- Because I think empathy is a tricky word, right? Because sometimes it gets mashed together with relatability. It's like, "Oh, I finally could relate. That person's different from me but then I can relate." I think there are also a lot of amazing books where I'm not going to relate. I'm thinking *Lolita* is an obvious example, but there's a lot more recent examples where-- It's not that I want to feel, or do, or think the same things as that narrator, but it's also that I also want to be in this world and feel curious about it. How does curiosity get animated, get activated by fiction?

Elisa: You get to walk in somebody else's shoes. I don't know of another way you can really do that in such a sustained way as in a novel. It's you get to inhabit somebody else's experience, consciousness. What am I missing? Where else can we do that? I guess in a movie to some degree, in a limited way, but it's a different-- Pictures are different. The brain processes them differently.

Leni: In the question of reproductive rights and reproductive justice, I think there are these really entrenched narratives that fiction among other things, can chip away. One of them is this abortion regret myth, that like abortion is always traumatic and it's always terrible. Hillary and Bill Clinton being like it should be safe, legal, and rare. Why should it be rare? Why does it have to be traumatic? For some people it's traumatic.

I think there's a lot of that unexamined storytelling around that directly relates to how legislation happens. Because if enough people are like, "Oh yes, no one wants to get an abortion," then maybe we shouldn't have them. That's really reductive, but that kind of regret, the afterschool special about like the high school girl who is going to kill herself because she's pregnant and doesn't want to have an abortion.

Elisa: Yes. It's not going to solve the larger political problems, but the sharing of stories really does chip away at ignorance. Once you have imbibed or digested a powerful narrative, you can no longer see an issue the same way. With each successive narrative about or around that issue, you become changed, irrevocably; it's no longer theoretical.

Whether it's somebody next door, or your cousin's friend, sister's friend, or a novel, it's actually a pretty profound matriarchal tradition, the sharing of stories orally long before there was writing, which is also a dangerous idea because it gets into like, "Well, what's the facts?" If it wasn't written down, if it's not codified, how do we know?

It's where the idea of an old wives' tale comes from, these sort of common sense things that now we get scientific studies confirming that the singing of lullabies does help children seem to sleep better. We've been sharing stories, and wisdom, and anecdotes, and helping each other through basic tenets of living in these reproductive bodies for as long as we've been on this planet.

The more we refuse to be estranged from that process and from each other in that process, the less power politicians have to sell us lies, I think. That might be too simplistic, but I'm going to stick to it. We have some questions for all the writers. Which authors inspire your work? Reese, I love your anecdote about praying to Virginia Woolf as you were trying to complete *The Incendiaries*. Who else?

Joanne: It's funny, this came up when I was doing the book talk with Reese because we had both been reading Woolf's *A Writer's Diary*. Anyway, I was reading Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* when I wrote *The Farm*, and I still read it before I write most days. The other book is; it's called *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo. It's actually a non-fiction book, to live in a slum in India, and it was just so beautiful. It was written like fiction, like novel. She writes about a lot of the issues that I'm interested in, the questions I'm interested in. Those would be the two books that really inspired me.

Elisa: Wonderful. What about you, Leni?

Leni: I'll just say number three for the Woolf. If I was pressed to name a favorite writer, she would definitely be it. Same with *A Writer's Diary*. Lately, I've been reading a lot of Roland Barthes, a lot of non-fiction like Barthes and Fred Moten, people writing about ways to organize ourselves in the world that do not reproduce the heteronuclear family or the traditional embedded power relations. That's something I'm just really curious about right now and looking for texts about that.

Elisa: Down with the nuclear family. Yes, I'm with you. Reese, what else?

Reese: Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* is so, so good. Her journals in general are such good company when you're working. I think it's six or seven volumes. I was so heartbroken getting to the end of the first read but, of course, a reread is always available and it's right there, multiple rereads. Let's see. Some books that I've been reading a lot lately. Solmaz Sharif's *Customs* is amazing. It's a book of poetry. She writes really, really

powerfully about her suspicion of the whole notion of empathy and of the whole notion of what that can do.

Natalie Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poem* is something I return to a lot. Gorgeous, gorgeous, incredible, powerful poetry. A couple of more recent books actually, so months is recent too, but a couple of recent ones are Ingrid Rojas Contreras' *The Man Who Could Move Clouds*, which is a memoir and it's stunning. One that just came out last week, Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *On the Rooftop* is really powerful and amazing.

Elisa: Awesome. I have been reading Benjamin Labatut's *When We Cease to Understand the World*. I think he's Chilean. It's really beautiful. Very intense. I also just gobbled up Emmanuel Carrère's auto-fiction, *Yoga*. Fascinating, really like his style. I'm working on a lot of short stories these days and I'm loving J. California Cooper who died in the '90s. She's very like Lucia Berlin. She's got a really unpretentious style that I resonate with a lot right now. That's what I've been reading.

Historically, I'm like a Philip Roth-themed, that sense of immediacy and brutality and just going way too far for the sake of argument always appealed to me in his fiction. I just feel like it's a really important artistic model. There's no political consciousness or correctness, I should say. He just doesn't give a shit. I find that really important. Kelly Midgley wonders how you think your works interrogate or engage with Atwood's. I know you love that question.

Joanne: I think I already answered. My interest was more on how free a free choice is in our society because of one's race or class or economic status does not have the power of the other person in the party. There's no one right answer to that because I've talked to readers who believe that May was right, and *The Farm* was a great thing because it helped these women change their lives. Honestly, I was a little surprised sometimes when I met people saying that and I'd meet other people who thought that these women were being exploited.

What was interesting is that in 2019, when the book came out, it's when the New York state legislature was debating whether or not to legalize commercial surrogacy in New York. There were only two states that didn't allow it, New York being one of them. My friends who used surrogates before it was legalized would go elsewhere, in North Carolina or whatever.

It was Gloria Steinem and some feminist groups and conservatives who were against commercial surrogacy because they believe that women like the women in *The Farm* would be exploited and it was gay rights, activists, and other people who believe that it should be legal rights. To all of your points, there is no certainty telling this stuff. It depends from what position you're coming from. The hard part is that you

can have both of those positions be true for those groups and coexist and you just have to still move forward and make a decision anyway.

Elisa: Totally. Atwood was writing about something very dystopian. It's a little silly to compare *The Farm* to *The Handmaid's Tale* because what *The Farm* portrays is happening, it's here. The Kardashians probably run one in Calabasas. It's not theoretical, it's not futuristic, it's not dystopian. People with way, way, way more money than they know what to do with, hire other people to bear children for them. It's just a simple fact of life at this point in our culture, in our cast. Not my cast, but this country's collective cast. Anyway, I feel your frustration with the ad campaign on the tube. Leni, what about you?

Leni: What I would say about Margaret Atwood and *Handmaid's Tale* is my book as well was sort of compared with that in the marketing. I understand why that happened and I didn't agree with it. I could see why it was being done. What I am grateful about is that I think in the last several years since our books have come out and many others have come out, there's a much broader sense of ways to tell stories about reproductive justice that don't have Atwood as their origin story.

Because there are other foremothers among writers, like Octavia Butler being an obvious one that she doesn't get talked about as much as Atwood, but there's many others. I think people are starting to learn more about them. Also, to find 21st-century ways to tell these stories and that seems like a good thing.

Elisa: If your only context is a novel from the '80s, you maybe have some work to do. Reese, what about you? What do you think?

Reese: Building off of that, it is also true that-- very much so that for instance, for a black woman on the idea of forced birth, that's not fantastical at all. Slavery was not was out of-- That's not fantasy. That happened for a very long time. I guess I would say that this is a centering of *The Handmaid's Tale* is also a centering of whiteness and of white bodies. That would be my addition, I guess.

Elisa: Industry leaders, it's time to move on, with all due respect to Atwood and her work as a whole, and in particular.

Leni: Where are you on Season 4 of *The Handmaid's Tale*?

Elisa: I don't know. I don't engage with that.

Leni: I Haven't seen it, but I think it's like a million seasons.

Elisa: God bless. God speed. We have a question here about politics that inform narrative and how we propel story and not fall into polemic. That's a really hard one I think. Reese, you want to take that one?

Reese: Sure. Let's see. I think I find in general with fiction that fiction, at least my fiction when I write fiction it actually resists polemic in a lot of ways because characters are people. I follow characters and what they do. I think there's a very worrying, I'm not the only one thinking this, a very worrying conflation in how people

are talking about literature of what an author believes about the world and what their characters are up to.

This just comes up over and over and over again. It's like, "Well, this book has like-- I don't even know this character has like a--" There's a character who is a really bad person. They're just going back to the idea of status definitions. There's a serial killer in this novel, therefore, the author is bad. This is like so simplistic and so wild.

I think because a novel is full of characters and because it's full of human beings, I just don't think that fiction lends itself very well, or at least the kind of fiction I'm interested in, doesn't tend to lend itself very well to polemic. That said, of course, like words mean things and narratives mean things. I think something that I, how do I say this? I think something I try to be very conscious of in my writing, without imposing my worldviews on the character, is just trying to be very, very intentional about the language I use and how the words are used. For instance, something that I-- again,

far from the first person to do this, but this is a minor thing, but it's not minor at all I think to me is a common tendency in American letters to know a character's race when they're not white, and then to never note it when a character is white.

That already comes from a default position of like, white is the default, white isn't race, white is not a color. In my fiction, especially from reading from the point of view of somebody who is themselves of color then that's just never going to be something that I'm going to be interested in doing. That's a really minor point.

Elisa: No, it's fascinating and it's important. Joanne.

Joanne: I was just going to say that I love James Baldwin and one of the things he says about art is that its purpose is to lay bare the questions, hiding behind the answers. If that at all resonates with you as a writer, it definitely does with me, it does in the words of Reese, resist. You're trying to tease, you're trying to explore a question. You're uncertain to start with.

I definitely had, I was interested in running the farm because of questions I had. Some of them were personal and some of them were about the system that we live in and how we could live together maybe better, but I had no answers and I still don't know that I could say that I do. I think if you approach writing with a question at its heart, and humility, that you don't know everything. It does resist from that process.

Elisa: Leni.

Leni: I would just add in this response to another of the questions we haven't gotten to about the novel form being a container of bourgeoisie selfhood and individualism. I think narrative structure itself can be polemical, in that it reinforces a particular understanding of how change happens or what it means, what a successful story **[inaudible 01:23:35]** is, or if there's even resolution at all.

I think for me as a reader, especially I want to really surround myself with work that experiments with narrative and all kinds of ways and what point of view as Reese was mentioning interrogating the unity or the authority of certain kinds of more traditional points of view and storytelling. I think it's also about reading.

Elisa: Reading, a lost art. That's a great question. The one that you just asked, that you refer to in the chat here from anonymous, regarding, how we work around the narrative norms that bolster us versus them, individualism that plagues our political discourse, I'm reading from this question. I think that's a really interesting question. If we are ever going to be honest about human beings or any particular human being in a story, one of the fundamental characteristics of us as a species is that we're really petty and tribal.

We really are. Even the best of us in our essentialist nature, we are inheritors of a tendency, a species-wide tendency to want to beat the other, want to win, want to be supreme, want power, whatever that looks like. Power is a weird shape-shift too. It's a fractal enterprise. In a room full of people who are very oppressed there will be a leader, and in a room full of the winners of the earth, there will be a scapegoat.

I think once we start getting down and dirty with human nature and with what it means to walk through the world with one of these minds and one of these bodies we're automatically we have to engage with our stupid petty nature. That's just who we are on some level. We transcend it occasionally, but not always. What do you guys think? Anyone?

Reese: Something I think a lot about is how-- a lot of writers have said this too, but this idea that finding in a book some of your worst thoughts and your worst tendencies and finding them written down your pettiness thoughts, just like the shittiest parts of yourself, finding that in a book, for me, at least, can provide such solace and can provide a way out of solitude.

For me, at least, I think I love books, so much, in part because I was just a lonely fucking kid, and I found so much friendship and companionship and shared humanity in books. I think that's something that I'm always interested in doing with the novel is I'm always writing for that girl who felt like the loneliest girl in the world and for people who feel that way. I don't know that that quite answers the question.

Elisa: I think that's a beautiful answer to the question. If anyone has anything to add, please do but if not, I think that's a gorgeous place to end. Anyone have any last thoughts they want to share? All right. Thank you so much for participating in this conversation. It's been mind-expanding and heart-expanding. Thank you to PEN/Faulkner for having us all here together. Thank you, Leni, Reese, and Joanne for these incredible books. I have really, really cherished my time with them in tandem and they will live together on my shelf forevermore, in memory of this beautiful evening together. Thank you.

Joanne: Thank you.

Leni: [unintelligible 01:28:23]

Reese: Thank you so much.

Leni: Thank you PEN/Faulkner.

Reese: Thank you.

Caroline: Hi, everyone. Thank you, Elisa. I just want to thank Joanne, Leni, and Reese again for sharing your insights and your perspectives with all of us tonight. We are so thrilled that you all were able to participate in this. My name is Caroline Schreiber and I'm PEN/Faulkner's Director of Development. I'm here to thank all of you tonight for making our work possible. Because of your generosity, PEN/Faulkner is able to serve thousands of readers and writers, and students each year through all of our education, literary, and award programs.

If you enjoyed tonight's conversation, and we hope you did, we hope you'll [make a donation](#) to support PEN/Faulkner's work across the literary community. Details can be found in the chat and every amount helps us to connect readers and writers and to celebrate amazing literature. Whether you choose to make a one-time gift or set up a monthly recurring donation, thank you so much for your support. Beyond tonight, we have a full year of exciting programming planned for you.

[Our next literary conversation](#), which is coming up on October 6th, we'll explore the impact of gun violence in America. We hope you'll join us for what promises to be another really thought-provoking discussion. That will be moderated by Glory Edim, founder of *Well-Read Black Girl*. More information is in the chat and it'll also hit your inboxes tomorrow. Thank you again to all of our writers for joining us and to all of you in the audience for your listening and your really insightful questions this evening. We hope to see you all again very, very soon. Good night.

[01:30:15] [END OF AUDIO]