

Literary Conversation: Voices of DC

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Gwydion: I am Gwydion Suilebhan. I'm the Executive Director of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. We are delighted to have you here. Thank you. PEN/Faulkner does programs like this. We give away the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award for the short story, and we also run educational programs in DC schools, connecting young readers with writers from around the region. I want to introduce, very briefly--

To my right, Rion Amilcar Scott, one of our judges for last year's PEN/Faulkner Award, thank you, and the award-winning author of the spectacular story collection *The World Doesn't Require You*. Next to Rion is Leslye Penelope, an accomplished author whose debut novel, *Song of Blood and Stone*, was one of *Time Magazine's* 100 best fantasy books of all time. Not of the year, of all time, which is amazing.

Then Zak Salih, the author of *Let's Get Back To The Party*, which Oprah recommended as a must-read book in 2021, and she's never wrong. Then we have our amazing moderator, Bethanne Patrick, PEN/Faulkner Board member, as well as an author and a book critic, who is so prolific. I don't know, a single person in the literary world who doesn't know and admire the heck out of her, and I'm one of those, and I do.

In our audience, we also have Tricia Elam Walker and Joy Jones, who are with us this afternoon, and Jeffrey Dale Lofton. This room is full of writers and it's awesome. I'm going to turn it over. Thanks.

Bethanne: Thank You Gwydion. Thank you so much, and thank you all for being here tonight. This dual event is something, I have to tell you, I turned up because I came to Bishop Walker a few years ago, for a Career Day, and I was blown away by what I saw at your school, just blown away. Not just the facility, the caring staff, not just the library, that actually focuses on books that show diversity and representation, but oh, those kids, those students.

I thought I was going to have-- They were going to say, "Oh, we don't want to go to a writer lady," because they had a firefighter, they had a football player, they had all of these people-- Thank you, that's better. Yet, the kids were so involved with the books I'd come to show them, that I had written, they wanted to see someone who had actually written a book, it really mattered to them. For us, to support the Arc and Bishop Walker, with PEN/Faulkner programming, it's so exciting and so vital.

Tonight, we're talking about voices of DC. I swear I will stop talking about Bishop Walker in a second, but one of the things I really love about the school is that it's not based just on academic achievement, because people with academic skills aren't the only ones who make up a community's leadership. We have here three writers, who are all fiction authors, but their books are so different, their strengths are so different.

We're going to talk about the way DC is made up of so many different kinds of communities, literary, and otherwise.

Thank you, welcome. One of the first things, of course, I have to say tonight, is-- I don't know if we're going to talk about Twitter or not, but I think there's some kind of variation of how many Twitter engineers does it take to change a light bulb? I don't have the answer, I don't have the punchline, but it's kind of a crazy week out there. Fortunately, we are here and we can talk about books instead. Let's start, my lovely authors, with the DC Metro region.

I'm going to ask each of you to describe it as it is today, and what makes it vital and dynamic to you. Zak, I'm going to just throw it on you, because you're right to my left. [laughs]

Zak: In my experience, growing up here, I spent my whole life in this area. I grew up in Northern Virginia, I've lived in DC properly for, I think, 10, 12 years, at this point. It is ever-changing, I think is a word I would use to describe that, and I think that can be both exciting to see, and concerning. The rate at which change happens, the things that change, the people that change, the way things are changing. Change has been a constant in my experiences of this area.

Bethanne: Very interesting. I like what you said about change being a constant, but it's not good or bad per se, it's just really fast. How about you, Leslye?

Leslye: I think that as much as it changes, it's also known for being fairly stable. In terms of people having government jobs, they come and they go with administrations, but a lot of the on-the-ground workers, my family members, who have been in government jobs for many years, find it to be stable. Yes, there's that aspect of it that is a microcosm of the country, in terms of the way that it changes.

It's maybe like a canary in a coal mine, for things that are going to happen, other places, early gentrification, just writing, things that have gone on and its history, but always staying strong, I think, and staying at the core of the country.

Bethanne: Shout out to the bureaucrats because I'm married to one, so I like that you brought that up. Thank you. Rion, how about you?

Rion: Yes, now that I live in Annapolis, I find myself sort of outside of it, and when I come back, I come back to my old neighborhood in DC, off Georgia Avenue, it's literally on Lamont Street, and it's a different place. The White people walking their dogs. They weren't there when I was there. I think there are three layers in DC, there's official DC, where people outside, they think of DC, and then, I guess there's Black DC, but then there's this other layer of new people coming in.

I like that my own neighborhood, it's a lot safer, it looks a lot safer than it was when I lived there. I remember I was listening to the TV one time, I wasn't watching it, and they were like, "There's been such and such number of shootings in the last week." I was, "Damn, I'm glad I don't live there." I walk into the room and it's my neighborhood on TV. It's a lot safer, but I wish there was that level of safety when it wasn't being gentrified.

Bethanne: One of the things I'd like to ask each one of you to do is, because each of your books focuses on a different layer, really, of DC, a different community, describe whichever book the world, instead of in insurrections, for example, Rion, whichever book you want, describe it as it is today, and what part it highlights of a particular community. Leslye, I'm going to start with you because your book is set furthest in the past tonight.

Leslye: Right. My book, *The Monsters We Defy*, is a 1925 fantasy heist that takes place in the U Street area of Washington DC.

Bethanne: It is so good, sorry. [laughs] It's really, really good. You got to read it.

Lesley: Thanks. I wanted to set it-- I went to Howard, I spent a lot of time on U Street in the late '90s, and discovering how it was in the 1920s, and '30s, and when it was Black Broadway, and when it was a self-sufficient Black community. I really just wanted to set a story there, and have that be the part of DC that we focus on. It's not about the government or the Capital, that doesn't really enter in at all.

It's about this specific place and moment in time, when Black people could live and work in amongst themselves, and not really have to touch the outside world if they didn't want to. Yes, that's, that's the part of the city I focused on, they called it the Secret City. They talk about Black DC, Chocolate City, which I guess is no more, but--

Zak: No, no. Don't say that. [laughs]

Leslye: I don't know. I think we can shed a few tears for Chocolate City, maybe we can bring it back. The Secret City-- There are many DCs, and Black DC is one of them, that is its own thing outside of what people all over the world probably think about, when they think about the nation's capital. Those of us who have a lot of family members from DC, my mom is born and raised in DC, I grew up in Maryland for the most part, but knowing Black DC and loving it, it was an ode to that, and the history of that, in my book.

Bethanne: Zak?

Zak: Yes. My novel is set entirely in DC, and the DC region. It takes place in the year between 2015 and 2016. It is about these estranged childhood friends who reconnect at a gay wedding in Georgetown, and it follows them throughout a year in their life as they kind of flit into and out of each other's lives. What I was trying to do with the book, in terms of setting it in a particular time in a community-- This isn't a scientific term, but DC is the only place where I've been a practicing homosexual.

Writing about the gay community here, not in an authoritative sense, but trying to capture some of the things that I've seen, heard, experienced, or felt, it was very important for me to set that story and the experiences of these two characters, in this thought experiment, so to be, of Washington DC, between 2015 and 2016. To really explore this idea, which is certainly one that I've felt, about what it's like to belong to a certain generation of gay men, who have no lived experience of the AIDS plague, but also neither have a real lived experience of living in an increasingly open society.

Bethanne: It's also really great. You have to read it. I love that the wedding at the opening takes place at Dumbarton Oaks, even though you don't actually name it. [laughs]

Zak: Well, I don't actually say that. Thanks, Beth.

Bethanne: [laughs] It's so great because it's such a clunky monument to waspy straightness, and here is this gay wedding to-- It's just wonderful. You didn't hear it from me. It's just me being a blabbermouth. Rion, would you talk about *The World Doesn't Require You*, please?

Rion: I take a different tack than my colleagues here. I made up a place, and my place is called Cross River, Maryland. I wouldn't necessarily say it's an analog for DC, but there's a lot that I take from DC. That area that I used to live in, Lamont Street, if you look very closely, that area, Lamont and Hobart area is in there. Especially from the 90s. There's a pulsing music in my work, called River Beat. Again, it's not an analog for Go-go, but it's very close.

Cross River, it's like a mashup of every place that I've known and loved. From DC proper to Silver Spring, where I grew up, my mother's Port of Spain, Trinidad, where she was raised. I think that-- Actually, what was the question? [laughs]

Bethanne: We were just talking about which part of DC your work reflects, and that's what you're talking about.

Rion: There's a lot of the culture, the lingo I grew up on. I take that and remix it into Cross Rivers' lingo, their clothes. Everything I imagine about Cross River, or a lot of what I imagine, is the culture that I grew up knowing reflected in a fun house mirror.

Bethanne: I'm going to continue with you for a second. If I hadn't experienced it through your book, I might say you had too much fun writing it, but I know that there's deep rage against injustice fueling *The World Doesn't Require You*. Your world-building is intricate and it's sometimes really funny, really wild. Talk to us a little bit about the role that humor plays or maybe, I don't know, zaniness, that it plays in advocating for change. Sorry.

Rion: I did have fun writing it. I have fun with language. I'm not going to compare myself to Shakespeare, but when you read Shakespeare, to me, the most fun part of Shakespeare is that you could tell that he had a whole lot of fun, in Othello, making the beast with two backs. That's a hilarious phrase. That's just a hilarious phrase. I can imagine him with his quill, laughing about that when he came up with that. Much of my work is very dark. There are a lot of dark emotions that I'm evoking, that I'm writing from.

It can be hard to live with and can be hard to write. Readers tell me that sometimes it's hard to digest. That's what humor is, it's giving people a chance to have a break, to have a rest, and laugh at the absurdity. I think I was going to tweet this, but I didn't tweet. I guess I forgot. Somebody said something about-- Rion Scott does a good job of writing absurdity. I'm not writing it. I'm recording the world's absurdity. If you look close enough, a lot of things are really, really hilarious.

You mentioned the collapse of Twitter. A lot of bad things are going to happen, from the people who lost their jobs. A lot of sadness. It's really funny. [laughs] It's really funny.

Bethanne: It's really funny. This brings me to Leslye. You are writing historical fantasy, and it gives you so much to play with. I'm wondering about some of the things, maybe, that you were able to use to your advantage in bringing in the fantastic elements in your book.

Leslye: For the fantasy aspects, I was trying to ground it. I wanted it to be very historical fiction, with this layer of fantastical, that's grounded in African American folk magic. I wanted to ground it in conjure and that root work, that idea, that's part of our culture, bring it forward, and have my own spin on it. It's so unique, it's so different, and it's different all over the country. That was the idea, to ground that. My main character, Clara, is born with a call.

Aside from all of that, she is able to talk to spirits, and her grandmother is there. Her grandmother's passed away but has stayed around, because Clara obviously needs guidance.

Bethanne: Is her grandmother a character?

Leslye: She's around, and she's helpful, and maybe she's around too much. Then the other layer of magic are the deals that the characters make with spirits. In this world, you can make a deal with a spirit and you'll get a charm and a trick. A charm is a power that might be helpful or useful, but the trick is another kind of power, or it's the debt that you owe. It's a negative aspect because everything has that cost to it. That's present--

Bethanne: Sorry to interrupt you, but what really interested me here is, as you just said, the power and the trick. This doesn't come from anywhere except Leslye Penelope's head, but then it's woven in with things that are real, like the tradition of calling spirits haints, and other things that come up from African American folklore, as you said. I thought-- Talk about having fun when you're writing. You're talking about a real DC, in the 20s. Things aren't, by any means, easy for Black people.

However, you are able-- This book was such a pleasure to read. I don't mean that pleasure to teach. It was just pure delight, every page. I wonder, did you feel that there was anything where you couldn't go, where you couldn't mess with X or Y?

Leslye: It wasn't that I couldn't. I was writing about the 20s, and I set it in 1925, I set it in August, because that's the month when there was a klan march down Pennsylvania Avenue, and it's mentioned in the book. I want you to know that this environment that these characters are living in is very inhospitable to them, to say the least, but they have carved out this place, where they're thriving and surviving. The enemy, the antagonists, are not racists. That's not the point. It wasn't that I couldn't go there.

I could definitely have written whatever, but I didn't want to dwell in black pain. I wanted to write something that was about black joy in that time period. Focus on other kinds of conflicts. I'm not ignoring it, but people had full lives, that had a lot of

variety to them. They were dealing with racism, but they were also dealing with just their community and how to make their community more powerful, and stronger. The antagonist is fighting against the community, is trying to destroy that community.

I wanted to keep it historically accurate. I took a lot of pains. Almost every place that's mentioned is a real place. There's real historical characters that come in, from Langston Hughes to Dr Carter G Woodson, they're in the book. I tried to match the personalities, my idea of the personalities, people might disagree. That's what I was trying to focus on, something that was realistic, but also leaning towards the hopeful and the joyful, while not ignoring the actual realities, that aren't so hopeful.

Bethanne: It's so interesting about how fiction can help us access communities we wouldn't otherwise understand at all. Zak, in your book, you actually have two main characters who not only are completely different from each other as gay men in Washington DC, but who also have completely different ideas about whether or not the presence of gay men-- How it should be celebrated, seen, or controlled in Washington DC.

That comes from what you were telling us about their age, and this-- After the AIDS crisis, and before the celebration of everything Pride. Not that any of us would say AIDS is over, or that Pride has completely conquered all, unfortunately, but it is a very specific time for your characters, and yet, they each couldn't be more distinct in how they feel about their community. Would you talk a little bit about that, in terms of what you were able to use for your story in the community?

Zak: Sure. Yes. Chalk it up to being biracial, but I just love putting polar opposites together and seeing what happens. One of my characters just wants to settle down. He wants to get married. For him, this conformity that comes with equality is something he's very open to. There is another character, who is literally his polar opposite, and who sees all this conformity, or this embrace of equality, the Pride floats, advertising, and such and such, as-- Well, he loathes it.

He sees it as a betrayal to the radicalism that being gay and being queer used to be. I really wanted to put these two people up against one another and see what happens. I think to me, that made this project very rewarding, especially in a city where the gayborhood is constantly changing. It's constantly moving east. When I was--

Bethanne: Where is the gayborhood? [laughs]

Zak: Don't ask me. I'm in my sweatpants at seven o'clock, [unintelligible 00:22:19]. [laughs] When I was a kid, from what I recall from stories, it used to be Dupont Circle. Now, as one friend complains to me, there are strollers everywhere in Dupont Circle. When I lived in the "Gayborhood", it was Logan Circle, along the 14th Street corridor. Now, apparently, it's moved east, to Shaw. It's constantly-- My joke is that, eventually, it's going to move so far east that it's going to be in the river, at some point.

It's just going to be this underground kingdom. Even still, things are changing. Bars open. Bars close. I've seen a lot of bars go. There are bars, to me, that were important places to a lot of people, but when I "came around on the scene," they

were just names. It's sad when you see these spaces, regardless of whether going to bars is your thing or not, that are still very important to the community and have a very rich communal history, it's always sad to see those places go.

There's something especially malignant about it to me, when they're replaced by condos. I haven't quite figured that out yet, but it seems like if something is going nowadays in DC, it's replaced by condos.

Bethanne: Well, condos and banks, that's all we have.

Zak: Condos and banks. Yes. Right.

Bethanne: This is interesting, what you're saying. I want to keep talking about your individual books too, but I want to talk, also, about these different layers in DC, and how the literary voices interact. We are here with the three of you, and we recently, at our Literary State of the Union event, celebrated two greats, Susan Shreve and Edward P. Jones, who just makes so much of a difference to our literary world here. Amazing. How do we foster a more dynamic and vital literary world in this deep--

We're talking about Voices of DC, and we want to lift up all the Voices of DC. We want to lift up voices that have been underrepresented for so long, in particular, but there's lots of ways to go about this. I'm wondering, which of you-- Who has the magic answer, the killer app for how to do this?

Zak: I don't have a magic answer, but I would say it's incumbent on two groups of people. One, it's incumbent on the writers to feel empowered to tell their stories, and it's incumbent on publishers to invest in those stories. That seems to me to be the--

Bethanne: Do do publishers-- I feel, definitely, that we are ignored a great deal when it comes to the glittering literary social life, that New York publishing has. That's no question. Do you think that Voices of DC, and DC types of writing also get ignored by the New York media elites?

Leslye: I was thinking of this as, initially, a Harlem Renaissance-era fantasy heist. I was going to set it in Harlem, and I'm like, "But everything's in Harlem. I'm going to set it in DC," because not every--

Bethanne: Thank you.

Leslye: We don't have enough books about DC. My publisher didn't have any qualms about that. I think that it's about lifting up writers, who are either from here-- So many people have come through here, even if they don't live here in the area now, whether it's through jobs or the universities. I don't know what we can do to encourage them, to remind them how great DC is, and how it's just fertile ground for all of these stories. Throughout history, the things that I discovered in my research were just so fascinating.

Even up until now, all of the political implications, and if you're setting any story that has any type of marginalized character-- Setting it near where the seat of government is gives you an extra layer on top of that, on top of the community that's apart from government. Yes.

Bethanne: That is so true. Come on. Perspectives on some of the big things that have happened here, and there are lots of big things that have happened in DC, but - Rion, I want to give you a chance to respond as well.

Rion: It's no doubt that the industry has a blind spot outside of New York because that's the capital. I think it's incumbent upon writers to feel like, "I'm going to write whatever the fuck I want, and I'm not going to pay that much attention to the market." It's not just DC. We need stories about everywhere. We need that history. There's a lot of stuff, you said already, that I didn't know. Can't wait to read the book.

I feel like we're coming back outside, we're meeting each other, and seeing each other. I think it's so important to continue to commune with our institutions, PEN/Faulkner, Hurston/Wright, and institutions that are doing things in the community,-

Bethanne: The Library of Congress.

Rion: -Darryl House, right, that are doing things in the community, and to meet people where they are.

Bethanne: Absolutely. Actually, I'm glad, Leslye, that you brought up the government, I was going to say it's the elephant in the room, but sometimes, the donkey, as well. [laughs] Each of you nod to that, in different ways. It can't be ignored, when you're writing about DC, as opposed to being a DC writer, who might be writing about something completely different. I wanted to ask you each, also, to talk a little bit about that.

I think that's one of the most wonderful ways so many of the DC writers have contributed to our national literature, is by saying, "This is something that's happening in the government, and there's something wrong," or, "There's something really interesting and shiny over here." Whichever one of you would like to take that first.

Rion: I guess I could just say in the context of my novel. To borrow from the infamous philosopher, there certainly is a specter hanging over DC, having set this novel between 2013 and 2016, and that is, of course, the election of 2016. Living here, I think, and maybe your experiences are different, but you can't help but be aware that this is the capital of a nation. Even though your interest may be so varied and you may have no interest in setting foot on the National Mall, or even looking at the Capitol Dome--

You can't divorce the two, I think. If so, it's very difficult, and I haven't learned how to do it. My characters haven't set foot in DC. [laughs] Actually, that's not true. The last story in my first book takes place in DC. It was a fictionalized account of my father's immigration to this country, it took place in the 1960s, and I interviewed him. Most interesting thing he told me about was the riot after Martin Luther King was killed, and his tepid participation in that riot, so my character does that.

I think that, yes, the world is going to seep into your work, and in that instance, there may not have been congressmen, or anything, or presidents, but the mismanagement of that event affected me, because 30 years later, there was

nothing there. I grew up watching crumbled buildings, and like, "Why are these crumbled?" When Martin Luther King was killed, I'm like, "Wasn't he killed 16 years before I was born?" However long it was. In 30 years, there was nothing there.

That institutional neglect, I think, it's seen in my work, I think the character see it, and feel it. We're always influenced by things that happened away from us, whether it's temporarily, or physically away from us, those levels of power being pulled in ways that are harmless and it's going to seep into our work.

Leslye: For my story, setting it at the time period-- In the research, I learned so much. In the late 1800s, after the Civil War, DC had the highest population of African Americans in the country. Before that changed, after Wilson came in and laws changed, and the government was resegregated, but before President Wilson, you know, the government was integrated, and Black people had jobs in the bureaucracy, and then that changed, it was resegregated.

The story takes place 10 years or so after that had happened. That's all there. It's all part of it. There were still Black people who had been senators, and Congress people alive at that point, who might have been present at the social events. There's a lot about classism in the Black community, and colorism in the Black community. In DC, at that time, a lot of that was because of who had government jobs in the past, and who didn't, and who was a recent migrant from the south during the great migration, and who wasn't.

There were people who had been in DC for generations, and people who were new, there's a tension there, and there's all kinds of levels of conflict within the Black community, that the characters have to deal with. It's not directly related to the government, the President, and the Congress, but they're all living as we all do, based on these decisions that have been made, that that have stripped away power, what once was had in this community.

Then that leads to the rioting and disenfranchisement that continues throughout the generations. I think my experience is a little bit different because I do know people who live in DC, family members, and it's very separate. You can live here and not care about politics, not follow it, not know about it. Especially in a neighborhood like this, family members who live over across the river, in different parts of the city, where it's not top of mind.

Survival, life is top of mind, and it just happens to be in the city where the government is. There's many DCs, there's many experiences of DC, on many different levels, and it's great ground from which a lot of different stories from those experiences can be told.

Bethanne: I'm so glad you brought that up because I think that is something a lot of people don't understand about, all over the capital region. We don't have a hotline, each one of us, that gives us the news. How many people call all of us, something goes on the government, "What have you heard?" I haven't heard anything. I'm in my study, writing. Like you said, someone's working a job there. We're not all given all the information all the time. It's misconceptions about DC.

Now, I know we started a little bit late, I want to make sure I leave some time for questions, but it really depends. Are we done at 6:30? Yes. I think I would like to open things up for questions that any of you might have, but if you don't, I have a lightning round of questions for our authors, that I pester them with. In other words, ask questions.

Participant 1: My question is for Leslye. I'm just curious about some of the interesting facts or factoids you learned about DC history.

Leslye: Oh, goodness. One of the things that fascinated me, that ended up in the book, was that the alley communities, that I didn't know that much about, behind the facades, the beautiful houses in different parts of the city, or all across the city, actually, there were other communities, literally back to back. The person in the front facing house wouldn't know that there was a house behind them, where someone was living, essentially, in squalor.

No plumbing, no electricity, into the '50s, and '60s, those types of things. I have stories about slavery, the hotels downtown, where they were, actually, in the basement, places where the property could be held, they were basically slave pens in the basement, so people would come and stay in these beautiful, nice hotels. Then also, the great stories about Black Broadway, and the Black-owned businesses, the theatre company, like Sherman Dudley, who was a theatre guy.

When I was researching Oscar Michelle, who was an early Black filmmaker, from the silent era into the talkies, I came across this network of Black theatre, that was all across the country. It started with Vaudeville, things like that, and moved into the movies. There were always these micro-communities of people thriving, existing, creating media and entertainment for Black people, that wasn't necessarily on the radar of other communities. The research was really fun and amazing. I'm sure there's lots of other things. I'll stop now. Thank you.

Participant 2: This is for all of you, or any of you. I was wondering, what do you think the role of fiction is, in making an impact in the real world, in social change, and social justice? Or is that not what fiction should be doing, or thinking about?

Bethanne: We will be here now-- We can talk about that for a long time, right?

Rion: I think that the powerful thing about fiction-- Well, the weakness of fiction is that you're not going to read a book, and all of a sudden, everyone's reading the book at the same time, and they all go out into the streets, and gun violence is done, and capitalism was falling, that's not going to happen. The novel has the power to ruminate on a lot of different things, it doesn't power the whole contradictions within itself, and not completely fall apart and make the individual really think about it in an intellectual and an emotional way.

The short story does a different, but similar type of thing. I think that every writer needs to write about what is obsessing them, and what's going on in their head, the craziness that's going on in their head. A lot of that is going to be influenced by the social situation. When the individual picks it up, the individual can figure out what they're going to do with it, but if you're trying to force that idea within your story, your

story is probably going to fall apart. Especially in the novel, you have to wait for contradictions.

Bethanne: Either.

Leslye: I would just add that I think that the empathy that's created from fiction is the thing that I focus on. Trying to show different characters, and hopefully, the reader connects with them, might see this fictional character, then recognize something about them in a real person, and think about it differently, and expand their mind in that way, also.

Zak: I think it's the responsibility of the writer to explain, and to try and understand and to explore. Then I think it's incumbent upon the reader, unfortunately, to do the actual hard work of taking that and putting that into the real world, whatever that may be.

Bethanne: I'll just say really interesting thing to bring up Twitter, again, is I got mildly flamed. I don't know if it was this year or last year, someone had written an op-ed in *The Guardian*, about the importance of challenging yourself as a reader and challenging yourself with different kinds of books, and sometimes, books that are complex and/or complicated. I put up that op-ed and said, "This is really good stuff to think about."

I just got whacked from every side, with people saying, "Don't you talk about reading as being difficult. I read to put myself to sleep. I read for entertainment. I read because I need escape. I read because my life is hard," and I thought, "Okay, okay, just keep reading. Keep reading, this is just something--" I think what Zak just said, actually, is really interesting. A reader chooses how hard to work with reading the novel, or the short story, and you can read something--

Come on, we all know what this is like. You're 14, you know everything, you read some great classic, and you think, "That's it. I've read Maupassant's *The Necklace*," or, "I've read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and I know." Then you read it years later, and you realize you knew nothing. I think this is a very interesting thing, also, to challenge the literary community, the readers, and all of us are readers, whether we're writers or not, to push ourselves a little harder.

That's where I think the engagement can come, with those social justice issues, is saying, "I'm not just going to look at this book as a delight over a cup of tea. I'm going to see what this author is trying to pass along to me."

Participant 3: I've lived in only black cities. Born and raised in New Orleans, and in Oakland, California, Brooklyn. I live in Baltimore now, and I work here in DC. My introduction to DC has only been southeast DC, so whenever I have to venture over to Northwest, where most of our donors come from, I'm always shocked, because [unintelligible 00:41:45].

Bethanne: [laughs] The cave dwellers.

Participant 3: This is DC. This is my experience of DC. What do you think DC, in terms of the contradictions that are exposed or resolved, or the empathy that could

be created? What does DC have to teach America, other cities? Baltimore's right up the corner, and it's so different. What can we learn reading novels that are place-based in DC? About not only DC, but about the country?

Bethanne: Great question, and such a big one. Leslye, you look a little-- You have a spark there.

Leslye: It is a good question, and I'm thinking about-- I've lived in DC. I lived in Baltimore. I live in Oakland. Cities have their own energy, they have their own vibes, and DC has a very different feel from Baltimore, that's very true. Like, to be so close. Yes, it's hard, because there's so much that goes into what makes up a city, the unique history, and the unique background, to the people who settle there and who stay there, and who call it home. The stories that I'm trying to tell are a combination of that.

I feel like my experience of DC, for my family, is people who've come from North Carolina, from Memphis, and from Virginia, and settled here, stayed, and brought all of those stories, those histories, that culture with them, mixed in with everything else, but it is that insular environment, that felt very different from Baltimore or Oakland. I'm not sure if I can answer the question, but I think it's all about people. For me, the novels are about the characters, and the characters are all just interactions.

Their interactions, the experiences that they've had, that their ancestors have had, and they're raising their children, or communing with their friends and family. It's just combining all of those things and trying to find some truth in that, that's truth for the people, that would be different if they moved somewhere else, among a different group of people, with a different background. That's the only thing I can think of.

Rion: Leslye talked about empathy. One of my heroes, Edward P Jones, and the way he writes about DC, down to these very little details, it makes me see the place in such a different way, because it's filtered through his consciousness. I think that's what's so important about-- Not even just writing about DC. I like communing with other places. I like picking up a book and reading about long-ago New Orleans, or something like that. The author might be of a different culture. It gives me an opportunity to walk in their shoes.

DC is a particular consciousness, and I think people reading Edward P Jones, they get one particular consciousness of DC. Reading Leslye, they'll get a different particular consciousness of DC. To answer your question, I think the beauty of having work that's about DC is the beauty of literature. It gives people opportunity to walk in the shoes of other people. The different DCs that are going to be represented in literature are just going to give us different ways of seeing the world.

Zak: I really like that the multiplicity of consciousness. I apologize if this sounds schmaltzy, but everyone has their own very personal idea of what DC is, and what it means to them. In a very beautiful way, I think this means that there is no such thing as the great DC novel, just as there is no such thing as the great American novel, or no such thing as the great insert your particular location or subculture novel. Everyone's experience is so unique.

I think, to your point, this is what makes literature so refreshing, is that I'm no longer constrained to just my personal experience of the city, or one writer's. Everyone, if they choose to run through that awful gauntlet, could write their own story about DC. This is a great thing, it means that there are so many voices, so many different perspectives, and so many books. Who could be mad about that?

Bethanne: Do we have time for questions?

Gwydion: I think we have time for one more quickly answered question. Quickly asked, quickly answered.

Participant 4: Yes. I'd just love to hear anything about their writing process, a place to write, or a time of day to write, what might get your writing juices going.

Leslye: For me, time of day has to be morning. I've tried the whole staying up until 2:00 AM, and it doesn't work for me. Yes, I write every morning. I get up and I write with people. I write on Google Hangout with other writers, to force me to be there. If I sleep late, there's someone who's texting me, like, "Where are you? You're supposed to be working." Other than that, I try not to have too many things that would hinder me, like, "I need a special this or a special that."

I just want to, wherever I am, be able to get up in the morning and write, and try to meet those deadlines. That's my basic routine, but tea is always involved. Tea is actually very important to my writing process.

Rion: I've always been a late-night writer, which is just so much harder as you get older, but when no one is there to bother me, my kids are asleep, that's when I can think the clearest. Again, if I do that on Monday, the rest of the week is short, so I have to actually learn to write other times. As Leslye said, I try to have no hindrances, whenever I can sit down and write.

Zak: I treat it like a full-time job. I do have another full-time job but I try and write a couple hours every day, Monday through Friday. I take weekends off. I take federal holidays off. That's just the way that I work. I grew up thinking that if one is a writer, one has to write every single day, for as much as one can. I think a big sea change that happened for me, as a writer, was learning that taking a break and thinking about your writing is writing too.

Gwydion: Thank you very much. Thank you all for coming. This was fantastic. That was awesome.

[applause]

Go forth, fight the traffic and win.

[all laughing]

[00:49:07] [END OF AUDIO]