Literary Conversation: Memoir

February 16, 2023

Gwydion Suilebhan: Good evening. I am Gwydion Suilebhan, PEN/Faulkner's executive director. I know this is Zoom, but I can almost feel how many people are here tonight and I am so excited about that. Most of you probably know PEN/Faulkner, but in case some of you don't, we are a national literary organization that's best known for giving out the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. We also run a variety of education programs that bring visiting authors and donated books and writing instruction into underserved classrooms in DC all at no cost to the schools to inspire the next generation of readers and writers.

Of course, we also hold public literary programs like this one. At PEN/Faulkner, we believe that American culture only thrives when stories from diverse perspectives enrich our lives. Tonight, we are very lucky to hear from three people who tell stories that represent very different perspectives on the human experience. We have Nicole Chung, the author of the forthcoming memoir, *A Living Remedy*, which is coming out in under two months, very exciting, and the national bestseller all you can ever know, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Nicole's writing has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *GQ*, *The Guardian*, *Vulture*, basically everywhere.

We have Isaac Fitzgerald, *The New York Times* best-selling author of *Dirtbag, Massachusetts*, who moderated our literary conversation on neuro divergence a pandemic ago. You can see Isaac on *The Today Show* and read his work in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *The Guardian*, again, basically everywhere. We also have Margo Jefferson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural critic, and a recipient of the 2022 Windham Campbell Prize in Nonfiction, who has published not one but two memoirs. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Vogue*, *Newsweek*, *Harper's*, once again, say it with me, basically, everywhere.

To my great delight, our moderator tonight is none other than PEN/Faulkner's own Bethanne Patrick, who is the literary programs chair of our board of directors, as well as an accomplished author and book critic whose own memoir *Life B* is making its debut this May, we are all looking forward to it. Her literary podcast *Missing Pages* is also an absolute must listen, I highly recommend it. With that, Bethanne, I will turn it over to you.

Bethanne Patrick: Thank you so much Gwydion. I am delighted to be here tonight so that I can talk to these three memoirists, who are so accomplished and such amazing colleagues that the honor is all mine but I think the pleasure is going to be all yours as we talk to Nicole, Isaac, and Margo. If you would turn on your videos and unmute yourselves now, we can get started on our wonderful conversation this evening. Welcome, all of you to this PEN/Faulkner literary conversation. Hi, it's great to see all of you and we're all in different places. This is a virtual conversation, but I know if we were able to be here together in one place, it would be even better. Thanks for joining me, colleagues. Thanks for being here.

Isaac Fitzgerald: Thanks so much for having us.

Nicole Chung: Thank you, Bethanne.

Margo Jefferson: Exactly. **[unintelligible 00:05:58]**

Bethanne: As I told you, I'm going to ask a question and then I'm going to have each of you read excerpts from your books. The question is, for all of you, for all of us, really, what impels us to take on the task of writing memoir? Let's talk about that for a minute. What is it inside of us that makes us say, "I am going to tell the world everything about me and some of it will be beautiful and some of it will be problematic"? Anyone want to start?

Isaac: I can jump first if that feels good for everyone. I feel like I can answer this on two different levels. I'll start with the hopeful, optimistic level, which is, I think when you share your own story, when you share aspects of your life that you maybe don't often bring up publicly when you're really reaching down for something powerful to put on the page, your hope is that it's going to make other people feel less alone. You are trying to be in conversation with the works that maybe helped you through your life. I grew up a reader and there are so many books and stories that helped me make sense of my very complicated childhood.

The optimistic answer is I wanted to share my story in hopes that it could help somebody else feel less alone. The less hopeful, optimistic, fun answer is, I don't have a great imagination. Fiction was never going to be for me, memoir for me, don't get me wrong, it takes art. You have to know how to tell your story, and that comes from years and years of reading, and years and years of practice. I am not one of those people that can just create a fantastical world out of my own imagination. I have a hard enough time making sense of the real world as it is.

For me, that's the more lowbrow answer is that it's easier for me to write nonfiction, that's why I turned to memoir, because for me, storytelling, it's like you have the clay, and then you make the sculpture out of it. I already have the clay and from there, I can curve the story that I want to tell.

Bethanne: A very, very good and apt way of putting yet. Margo, how about you?

Margo: Well, it's tricky for me, because I have always found it interesting to read memoirs, but until I wrote one, of course not that long ago, been quite resistant because I had a very strong sense of what should stay private in terms of the way I'd grown up and what should be public and a very strong sense of readers as judges of your character, of your past, of the world you were part of. It's this business of examining and dramatizing yourself but continuing to find different aspects of the larger world in which to do that.

That is, I think, the most interesting thing to me. You can tell the same story in all number of ways. As you're telling it, the lead characters change, the supporting characters change, you start assuming other persona, so it gives you and hopefully the world, but it gives you a sense of continually unfolding. It could be a narrative, it could be a lyric, and somehow it's intermingling with your everyday self.

Bethanne: I love that. I absolutely love that. Nicole, I know with your second memoir now as well, like Margo, you realize that it's not just one story, memoirs don't have to just write one book, some write many. Talk to me about this question and how it affects you.

Nicole: Thank you. Margo, I love what you just said about one of the joys of memoir or the interesting challenges being that you're always becoming, and it's always changing, and you're changing while you write it and you know that when you come to an endpoint of this particular memoir, the story does, in a sense, go on. I actually love that aspect of memoir, and it can make it really challenging to end one because hopefully there's going to be quite a lot after. I think in terms of why I was drawn to it, I came to writing nonfiction and personal stories, I wrote mostly fiction and really bad poetry, it was bad.

Growing up, and through college, all the writing classes I took in college, it was mostly fiction and poetry. Then several years out of school, I was living in Durham, North Carolina, and I was anxious, and I just felt like I needed a creative outlet and I hadn't been writing. I joined a small community writing group, and nearly everybody was working on memoir, which I had never written except for maybe one or two experiments in college and was similarly like, "Oh, but like, I'm actually a very private person," believe it or not. [laughs] What I loved about their stories and like what really drew me in about the personal stories they were telling was the way it made me think about people I had known, people I loved, my own life. That was my first best lesson in the genre was that what happens to the person, it may or may not be all that exciting. It's probably fairly mundane in many cases, but what was the art? As Isaac said, the art is in how the writer makes sense of that. Like, we. At the time, the books I was reading too, they were introducing me to these characters and these lively stories, but they were rearranging real life to do it. They were deciding what memories do I pull, what are the things a reader needs to know to follow me on this journey and actually care even though it didn't happen to them. That's what I love about it still. There are so many different reasons for writing memoir. The reasons I wrote my first have very little to do with why I tried to write this last one, but I think the uniting thread is just what Isaac was saying about hopefully a reader reads it. It makes them think about their own experiences and maybe they feel less alone.

Bethanne: Thank you so much. All three of you gave such different answers. I'm always not surprised when that happens but delighted. It's so wonderful to hear writers speak in different ways about their experience. Especially about memoir for me because I've come through this so recently and it took me so long, [laughs] but in any case, I'd like to hear--

Margo: Here we ask you why--

[laughter]

Bethanne: It's like, okay, sold it in 2017 and now it's 2023, but you know what? I managed to do it. I finally finished last year on February 1st, I sent in my manuscript. We all understand this. Then you wait for your agent to come back to you. I already knew we'd sold it, but I still didn't know if my agent was going to say, "Okay, I'll send it along to your editor." The day that she called, I was holding my breath, and she told me over Zoom, "I love it." That's such a feeling. It really is. Because I want our

audience to feel this as well, I'm going to ask each of you to read a brief excerpt. I know that we are going to go in alphabetical order. Nicole, would you please start? This is from *A Living Remedy* or is it from *All You Can Ever Know*?

Nicole: I picked a passage from *All You Can Ever Know*. I hope that's okay. I don't have one of my own galleys anymore. I would have to pull up the word document if I was going to read from the next book.

Bethanne: Well, thank you so much for choosing this. I know everyone will be delighted to hear.

Nicole: Thank you. It's a pretty brief reading. It's not from the very beginning, but it's near the beginning. For those who don't know, *All You Can Ever Know*, my first memoir, is about my experience growing up as an adopted Korean American in a white family in Southern Oregon, and then what happened later when I decided to search for my birth family while pregnant with my first child. This particular passage, because by then we were talking so much about writing from childhood, I picked a passage that covers part of my childhood.

Bethanne: Wonderful.

Nicole: One spring when I was 10 years old, my parents took me back to Seattle. I remember many steep walks up hills that week, stunning views of mountains rising over the city. Standing on the deck of a ferry and watching the foamy white cleft in the ship's wake widen, I felt as though we were riding atop a skyscraper. My parents drove by the house whose attic apartment they'd once rented, and we slowed and lingered at the curb long enough for me to imagine my 20-something father or mother peering down from the highest windows. My favorite outing of the week was to the Chinatown-International District and the enormous Asian supermarket.

The cavernous store was so different from the Food 4 Less where we shopped for groceries at home. It was bursting with strange, wonderful smells, crammed with boxes and barrels of vegetables and fruits, tanks of live fish and seafood and meat on ice, jumbled displays of crockery and ceramics, and lacquered chopsticks. While there were a hundred thousand things to touch and taste and try to take in, what truly enthralled me were the people. Never before had I been entirely surrounded by Asians. I had seen others one by one back at home, but at this magical store, they were everywhere.

Busy Asian shoppers hurried past us, clutching shopping lists; Asian grandmothers and aunties scanned products with a critical eye, weighed down by large purses; Asian parents pushed carts and strollers, towing their children by the hand. My mother and I cooed in unison over chubby-cheeked babies and toddlers with the same stick-up-straight, gravity-defying hair I had seen in my baby pictures, the hair my white mother had struggled with so, trying everything she could think of to make it lie down flat. At home, I kept a secret running tally of every single Asian person I had ever seen in public.

I was on nodding terms with some of them. The woman at the Minute Market. The people who owned the Chinese restaurant. The couple who were always behind the counter at the Donut Den. It was possible to go months, even years without seeing

any who were new to me. Walking around Seattle that week, I tried to play my Count the Asian game and lost track every time. Here, finally, I was inconspicuous. There was no reason for anyone to look twice at me, though, in truth, a few passersby probably did glance at us, their eyes flicking over and up to my white parents and then back to my face. It was novel and exhilarating to be one among so many, a glimpse of the world as it could be.

I couldn't count all the Asians, but I quickly found another secret game to play. Although I believed that I would never meet anyone from my birth family - that, even if I did, it wouldn't be because they'd recognized me wandering the streets of Seattle with my white parents - I spent the entire week scanning the faces of Asian people walking by. Every time we passed an Asian woman around my mother's age, I could not help but wonder if she might be my mother. A relative, at least, or perhaps just someone who'd known them. If I walked by them on the street, I'd recognize them, wouldn't I? I would just know.

In passing, I imagined, my birth mother and I would both suddenly be aware of a connection, unexpected and undeniable. Something in her would call out to me. I'd look into her face, overcome by a flash of familiarity, a memory woken. It seemed impossible we'd be able to cross paths like strangers and keep moving down the sidewalk away from each other, never to know, never to meet again. Thank you.

Bethanne: Thank you, Nicole.

Isaac: Oh, I'm going to, and I'm sorry. I **[unintelligible 00:19:33]** these Zooms, I can't with the quiet. I got to, sorry.

Bethanne: I think that's okay. Oh whew. I have to say, okay, Isaac, now break our hearts again.

Isaac: This is from my book *Dirtbag, Massachusetts*. It's from an essay titled Confessions of a Former Former Fat Kid. The slap of my mother's hand against my bear stomach rings out and fills the entire store. I watch as my belly jiggles in the floor-to-ceiling mirror mounted on the column in front of us. We're surrounded by racks of cheap clothes in terrible colors. Oh, I'm sorry. If you can hear a quick sadness - if you hear that sound, I swear that's not me just trying to get the audience more sad. That's just my dog is in the background, just doing a little bit of-- a little confused by where the sun went down. It's a little sad. If you hear that, apologies.

We're surrounded by racks of cheap clothes in terrible colors. In the mirror, my mother looks me right in the eyes, her hand pinning my shirt up to expose my midriff. "If you weren't getting so fat, I wouldn't have to buy you new clothes," she says. My skin stings as the red mark of her hand fades. I pull my shirt down and refuse to cry. We're at a Stuart's in Athol, Massachusetts. Stuart's was like Walmart for poor communities in New England back before Walmart realized it should be Walmart for poor communities in New England and everywhere else. I'm eight years old, growing, getting bigger.

When we lived in Boston, my father made sure that I got exercise, taking me out for long bike rides while he ran alongside me. My dad stayed in Boston, and Ma and I moved out to the country. "You'll have a yard," Ma said, and I pretended to be happy.

I tried to play in the yard, but it didn't make up for the lack of bike rides, or the Chef Boyardee for dinner most nights, or the pasta and butter with a side of bread on the others. Ma had been bigger too when she was younger and she wanted so badly to save me from that same fate. It didn't help that now we were living next to her parents in rural Massachusetts, in a town she promised herself she would escape, a town she'd successfully escaped right up until she hadn't.

Now we lived in the house next to her parents in the town where she'd been a big girl. Now my mom lived with her son but without her husband, who had to stay in the city because "there aren't enough jobs out here," which I found strange because there seemed to be plenty of jobs for my friend's dads and "not enough jobs" didn't explain why Ma cried most nights and why her Ma, my grandma, looked at me like I was the garbage someone forgot to take out. I'd sneak bowls of cereal when no one was home, pouring sugar and honey on the off-brand Cheerios pretending they were the Honey Nut kind, the kind my other grandma - who lived near the ocean and never looked at me like I was trash - always fed me.

I would wash the bowl before ma got home from work. She would cry and I would hug her and do the only thing I knew how to do, which was not cry. The same way I don't cry now under the fluorescent lights at Stuart's surrounded by clothes that don't fit and we can't afford. Thank you.

Bethanne: Thank you. Thank you. Wow. Before we move on, we have one more excerpt. Last but far from least, Margo, would you please read to us from *Constructing a Nervous System* your amazing new memoir? Amazing. Yes.

Margo: All right. This is actually the opening. I stood in a bright, harsh light. The stage was bare. I extended my arm-- no, flung, hurled it out, pointed an accusatory finger, then turned to an unseen audience and declared, "This is the woman with only one childhood." It was part of the night's dream work, and I was rattled when I woke up for I'd been addressing myself. My tone was harsh and my outstretched arm with its accusing finger had the force of that moment in melodrama when the villain hitherto successful in his schemes to ruin the heroine's life. When that villain is revealed, condemned, and readied for punishment.

I understood what I had to do. At the end of his stage show, Bill Bojangles Robinson would look up at the lighting booth and shout, "Give me a light. My color," then - pause - blackout. When the light returned, I knew it was time to construct another nervous system. For most of my adult life, I'd felt to become a person of complex and stirring character, a person, as I put it, of inner consequence, I must break myself into pieces. Hammer, saw, chisel away at the unworthy parts, then rebuild. It was laborious, like stone masonry. On the stone masonry model, the human self says, "Go on." Admires itself for saying, "Go on," and proceeds to go on.

As I went on, I grew dissatisfied. This edifice was too fixed. I wanted it to become an apparatus of mobile parts, parts that fuse, burst, fracture, cluster, hurdle, and drift. I wanted to hear its continuous thrum. Thrum go the materials of my life, chosen, imposed, inherited, made up. I imagined it as a nervous system, but not the standard biological one. It was an assemblage. My nervous system is my structure of recombinant thoughts, memories, feelings, sensations, and words. Repeat after me. It's time to construct another nervous system. You write criticism, you write memoir.

What will be your tactics, strategies, instruments for constructing this nervous system?

I keep carping and fussing, rearing up against the words critic and criticism. Such a ghast, temperate words. They make me think Gertrude Stein was right, but nouns are boring because all they do is name things. Just naming names is all right when you want to call a role, but is it good for anything else? When you're thrilled by applying buttress, the sound chamber of notes and syllables, when an idea makes you feel as if the top of your head were being taken off, then abandon that two-temperate pro-zone and keep writing criticism. As for memoir, I keep attaching adjectives to it. Cultural memoir, temperamental memoir. What makes me so ancient?

I want memoir and criticism to merge. Can they, and if so, how? Read on. Thank you. [chuckles] Mutual appreciation.

Bethanne: Yes. There are so many places to start, and this is why I had to make sure that I gave myself parameters. First, Nicole, the line about never having been surrounded by Asians before took my breath away when I first read *All You Can Ever Know*, and there are many people from underrepresented groups of all kinds who have had similar experiences. The realization of the experience and being able to market on the page, this is something I see in all three of the memoirs we're talking about here. It's a kind of witness, isn't it?

Nicole: I think so. It's interesting. I remember feeling as though-- I don't know, *All You Can Ever Know* was the book I had to write first. I had no idea what was going to come after that, but it almost felt like I needed to make a little bit of space somehow for myself. Part of that was growing up and just not reading stories by-- Not a lot of memoirs by Asian American women when I was growing up or essay collections, not a lot of young people's literature, and then never ever seeing a transracial adoptee experience in literature.

I don't know. That was also a reason why I felt it had to be a memoir. I've been asked by others, did you ever think about turning it into a novel? I think they often ask because they imagine that gives you another layer of privacy, protection, whatever. Honestly, I never thought about that. I always felt like to me, just for this book, in particular, there was something very powerful to me in the idea of an adoptee telling this story and telling it as the truth. I understand what you're saying about witness, and I think that was part of it, certainly.

Margo and Isaac, I'm sure you'll agree, it's one thing to know a thing intellectually, in this case, I grew up and I was the only Korean I knew until 18, but knowing that and then writing it are two very different things. Then trying to explain to the reader why they should care was another thing.

Margo: The tone. All the ways that you've experienced, which tone do you pick?

Bethanne: Which memory do you pick? As you said, which tone do you pick? Which details do you give? Isaac, what you witness in moving back, I'm going to say if I can say this correctly because Massachusetts has so many place names with interesting-- Is it Apple?

Isaac: Yes, we'll take it. We'll take it.

Bethanne: [chuckles] Your grandparents' domain and their disdain are also heartbreaking. It's always difficult to write about our past, but writing these pages about being a fat kid especially, I've known some other grown men who had had experiences of being a fat kid and it always seemed to be such an awful tender point. Writing these must have been very difficult, writing that scene you read. Talk about--

Isaac: Well, just quick to start with the town name. There's a fun story there, which is that the title of the book, *Dirtbag, Massachusetts,* that title actually comes from my good friend who's also a wonderful writer, Jason Diamond. That's because Athol, Massachusetts, I'll give you one guess what everybody else in Massachusetts calls Athol. It's a family program, but you get the idea.

[laughter]

Isaac: Technically you can name a book that, that Massachusetts, but it's not going to do very well as far as getting out there into the world, search-- just a lot of people would be blocking it because it's a-- bookstore **[unintelligible 00:32:05]**. I was talking to Jason about how I couldn't, and for the record, at this point, so much of this book wasn't written at that point. I was just in love with this idea. He was the one that said without even-- it was two seconds. It was so easy it hurt. He just said "Dirtbag, Massachusetts."

I really think at that point, the book that I was planning on writing is not what this book became. When I set out to start writing this book, it was a completely different book. I'm so grateful for Jason Diamond for giving me that because that was a moment, I would say the first moment, where it really began to turn. Then the next moment was after I worked on it for 18 months without getting much done. The idea I had was I was going to write about my own experiences but with a lot more about pop culture and a lot less focused on me.

After 18 months of not getting very far, everything I try to write, all of a sudden there'd be seven paragraphs about my father, or seven paragraphs about my mother or her parents. Finally, I called my editor and I said, "I don't think this is the book I sold you. If you allow me, I think this is going to be a book about my childhood." She said, "I've been waiting about 18 months for you to figure that out."

[laughter]

Isaac: Again, God bless patient editors. The Confessions of a Former Former Fat Kid-- it's Former Former because the point of the essay is that, I continue as a human being to both shrink and expand. It's me coming to-- trying to, not coming to, because I'm very suspect of anything that's wrapped in a bow that's a present that's perfectly delivered. The point of this book is that everything's very messy. What I'm trying to learn is how to be at peace with the body I have no matter its size. That's why when people talk about this essay, it's often printed as Confessions of a Former-- they think it's a typo, but as a Former Former Fat Kid on purpose.

Part of the essay is, it's the only picture that's in the book, but I show a picture of when I was most uncomfortable with myself. When I was most judgmental of myself and critical of myself and my body size. At the time, I was doing a lot of drugs and I was probably the skinniest I've ever been. I wanted to show how it's so much of the ways that we tear ourselves down and tear ourselves apart is a mental game more than anything that's attached to reality. That's what I was trying to tackle with that one.

Bethanne: Thank you. Dysphoria is so difficult and you're talking about tackling ideas about the body, but Margo, you are talking about in *Constructing a Nervous System*, ways of tackling ourselves as humans with all of these layers and ideas that are not part of our own body but are part of our body. It's about construction and you almost had to construct a new way of writing. This is written so differently from your first memoir. Tell us about that as a challenge or also, as Isaac was saying, as something you fell into and thought, "This is it. Finally, I'm telling the story the way I need to tell it."

Nicole: I work in a lot of separate pieces and I seem to need to do that. I magpie and then at a certain point, it looks hopelessly disjointed. It's like, "Oh, okay, I'm unweaving [laughs] every night, and then I'll weave it again during the day."

Bethanne: Oh yes. [laughs]

Nicole: One thing that helped, I learned with *Negroland* that when I said, when I opened it by saying, I think the line was, "I was brought up to me to distrust memoir." I thought, "Oh okay, that's the central tension in some way. I can work my needs, my need to be narrator chronicle historian, to be dissident, to be the exile from this Black bourgeoisie, to be a watcher and participant." All of that can be handled through these tensions. With *Constructing a Nervous System*, I had to say early on, wherever it began in the book, if I want to write memoir, I want criticism to have the intimacy and the acuteness and the physicality as well as the imaginative intensity.

I want criticism to have that and I want memoir partly, I guess because I've been a critic so much in my life. I want the memoir to invite a kind of ability to be clinical, analytical, and harsh. [laughs]

Bethanne: And objective.

Nicole: Hard on myself. As well as attempting to find modes of understanding.

Bethanne: It's so interesting for me because I am neither the critic nor the memoir writer that you are, Margo, but I do recognize those tensions. This is something I really wanted to talk about tonight, and I hope that our audience will be interested in this, but I wanted to talk about process a little. We are talking about challenges and tensions. Nicole and Isaac, either one of you can jump in when you want to. What are some of the challenges for you in these memoirs? Maybe also, what was the hardest thing that you learned about your own process? Maybe the hardest thing, Isaac, was that it takes 18 months to get anywhere. For me, it was certainly longer than 18 months.

Isaac: Yes, there's a part of me that's like, "I just want Margo to talk the whole time."

Bethanne: I know.

Isaac: [laughs] I'm learning so much. I'm taking notes. No, I want to be very clear, 18 months is when I brought myself to actually start the thing. All I'm saying is it comes when it comes and it does take a long time. I would say to anyone that's watching this and thinking about writing your own memoir, writing your own stories, writing at all, in general, all I can say is it's going to take longer than you probably think and that that is A-OK. I think for me, the challenge, there were so many, but one that Nicole touched on earlier is just you understand that you're sharing private moments. Of course, you're sharing your own story, but none of us live in a vacuum.

You are 100% going to share other people's stories and not their full incredible-- they're going to be slices that are linked to your three-dimensional story. One, to connect it to what I was just saying about, let it take the time it took, if I'd written this memoir when I was 25, one, I was just a much worse writer, so it would've just been bad because of that. Also, it would've been a lot angrier. It would've been so angry and I'm so glad that I-- don't get me wrong, I'm sure I attempted in my own ways back then, but I'm so glad that it took the time that it took so that I could grow a little older and I could grow a little bit more empathetic, and I could see the people in my lives as the three-dimensional human beings that they are.

You still do get to this moment of you're sharing this story and there are people in your life who are going to-- there's no way to sugarcoat it or make it easy. They will be hurt by the stories that you are telling. Just one quick one is, I knew I could not show it to my parents before I published it. I just knew that that would become another excuse to not publish it. I did want to make sure they had it before it was out in the world. When I finalize the draft, I showed it to my mother, who is an incredibly intelligent woman. She reads and reads and reads. My love of writing, my love of books, it is because of my parents.

She read it in one night. What I said to her was, "You don't have to read this. We have a relationship outside of this. This is art. You don't." She's incredible. She read it in one night and she wrote me the next-- we got on the phone and a lot of powerful conversations happened that I don't want to share, to be honest, but one helpful one, she was just like, "Where are all the camping trips?"

Nicole: It's never the thing you think it's going to be.

Isaac: Where are the canoe rides, young man?

[laughter]

Isaac: That's when what I said, kind of what I said earlier about clay, and then you take the shape. What I said to her was, "Look, the truth is is a hunk of wood, it's a log. I carved this particular sculpture out of the truth. I know your sculpture would look a lot different, and that's okay." Like I said, this book does not have a happy tidy ending, but I can say after the book has come out, me and my mother are having some of the best conversations of our entire life, so that's been very nice.

Bethanne: I just want to jump in there, Isaac, and say, this is really crucial to me right now because I do have one family member who has read the book and has

chosen at least temporary, I hope not permanent estrangement. My mother, who hasn't even read the entire thing, she's read some of the chapters that I needed to have her read along the way. I said, "Okay, it's time for you to read the entire thing, I'll get you a galley." I said, "This may be difficult, and it's okay if it is." She said, "I'm too old to let anything get between me and one of my children. That's just not something--" I thought, "This is the way I need to react to anything anyone ever writes about me. I have children."

I thought that was really, really a lovely way. I just want to go back to what you said and then ask Nicole this, as well as Margo, having these great conversations. This is what I wanted to do, this is one of the things that impelled me to write memoir, was to change the conversations, to get things out in the open, to get secrets out of that confessional, if you will, Isaac. [laughs] Totally, that resonates very much. Nicole, how about you?

Nicole: What do I find hard about writing memoir? Like everything. I think like with the first book specifically, it's the first book, and you don't know if you can write a whole book. [chuckles] Up until *All You Can Ever Know*, the longest thing I'd written was like 5,000 words maybe. I was like, "Wow, it's pretty optimistic of them to give me money to write this on proposal. Let's see if I can do it." That was a huge stumbling block, actually, was just like, can I write an entire contained lengthy-- like a book-length project? I also had to get to a point with the first book in terms of, since it is, it is hyper-focused on adoption, and it was actually very easy relatively to figure out what went in it and what did not.

I would hold up these memories and think, "Is this relevant? Do people need to know to understand my adoption what it was like growing up as a transracial adoptee and understand why I searched for my birth family?" If they didn't need to know that particular moment, it didn't matter how much I loved it or how sentimental I was about it, it just ended up being cut. I was ruthless really about what went into that first book. I had to get to a point in my life where, because the book is-- I mean, it's obviously personal, but it's also looking at these whole systems. There wasn't a lot of adoptee-authored literature at the time in the mainstream, so I felt this additional pressure like a burden of representation that I wish I hadn't.

I had to learn to put down that burden actually before I could really write the story. I couldn't be anybody's token. I could not be the good adoptee, happy, loyal, grateful, never questioning, never curious. I had to learn to put all that down and I couldn't have written this book, Isaac, to your point, I could not have written in my 20s at any point because apart from also being a much worse writer in my 20s, I didn't have the perspective. I was still shouldering this burden in so many ways of like, what is an adoptee supposed to be? What do I owe my family? I never thought about what I owed myself and what I owed the truth. I had to think about those things to write the first book.

With the second, I'm also relating to what you're saying about letting it sit for 18 months, wasn't quite that long. My second book is very much about grief and class and again, like a lot of systemic things, but in the process of writing it, my mother got a terminal cancer diagnosis and I lost her two months into the pandemic. I didn't write for probably five, six months after, I just couldn't, and it was just too painful. Thank goodness for patient editors, but I do think there's a universe where another

editor, another publisher might have pushed me and just said, "Look, you have a contract. I'm sorry, but we need this book and we need it by this date," and it wouldn't have been the book it needed to be.

I needed that time and I needed to take care of myself, and I needed to find grace for myself, which has been really latent coming in my career for me. I'm so thankful I found it because I couldn't have actually written a living remedy if I'd just been pushing through no matter what. I do want to echo what Isaac said about, it will take time, it's going to take the time it takes. Hopefully, you have people on your team who understand that and are supportive because, I just think sometimes that is what the book needs so often, that's what the writer needs.

Margo: I'm moved by both of you making so clear that we each have our burden. [laughs] The thing that it's almost, whether it's representation, shame, all of the above, this thing that weighs us down that's so hard. We know it needs to be transformed, and that's what language and thinking, and feeling will do, but it's so hard [laughs] to pull this rock from the chest and let it become something else because we've been living our lives in these ways, with these particular burdens.

Bethanne: That is so true. Margo and I were on a panel, one of Michele Filgate Red Ink panels back when I had either was still trying to sell the memoir or had just sold it. On the panel, we had six, seven women, all of us talking about different ways depression had manifested--

Margo: That was the subject.

Bethanne: Yes, it was the subject.

Margo: Many variations, but the theme was depression.

Bethanne: That's right. I will never forget the moment when I said-- and I happened to have lived as a military spouse, and Margo said, "Oh my Lord." [laughs] She, in that moment, was recognizing, "Oh, this is the burden. This is what this woman is talking about. This is the burden that I--"

Margo: Talking around and talking through.

Bethanne: That's right. That's right. That's what we all have to show and figure out what the central nugget or kernel there is, and it's not easy. I think we've been talking about this, but maybe each of you could take it on a little more specifically. Sometimes we end up being really unsympathetic characters in our memoirs. We are not coming off as, "Here I am an angel to tell you about all of the wrongs everyone has done to me." I think that's a really-- [laughs] Right, Margo?

Margo: It's a horror. It's a deep temptation, I suspect, but it's awful. Yes.

Bethanne: Yes. You have to fight that. Isaac, I think you might be well-placed to talk about not putting yourself in the best light all the time.

Isaac: What do you mean? I'm an angel. I don't know what you mean.

Bethanne: You are an angel.

Isaac: I'm going to touch on it quick, but Margo, it looked like you had something to say on it, so I'm going to pass it to you. Yes, that's right.

Margo: Why didn't you go right ahead? I don't remember what I had to say. You know what? I think I was going to say, and that'll lead it right back to you. Once you realize your great need is not to be loved, admired every minute. I think that can be especially important for women because we are so often raised to behave so well and so much seems to be invested. I think here not only honesty, emotion, intelligence, but technique. For me, it was changing voices, and persona, and moods, really documenting a lot of mood changes. That's what I meant about self-criticism too. Trying to make that interesting. There are a lot of ways to do it, but really technique has a lot to do with it, I think. I'd love to know what Isaac and Nicole-- how they found their way through that.

Isaac: I agree 100%. For myself and absolutely, like I said, I'm an angel. No, it's a very quick answer for me, which is-- listen, I want to be very clear about something. I'm so happy that I waited till I was 35, like I said, to write when I got started, for the record, I'm 39 now. That's not true, 40. Just had a birthday. I do want to say one thing. There's no rules. If you are watching this in year 20, you might have-- Not many incredible memoirs have been written by incredibly young or incredibly long, long in their life people. Debut memoirs, just, one, there's no rules.

For me, you have to write an essay, especially a personal essay, or a memoir, or a piece of personal non-fiction writing that ends with, and that's what a good person I am. You have to be a tremendous, tremendous writer to make that interesting. You have to be a tremendous writer to make that interesting. I'm not that good. For myself, I'm not interested. I'm so rarely interested in the essay that ends with, "And that's why I'm perfect now," or like I said, a bow on the end is never-- [crosstalk]

Margo: Here's what I've learned. [crosstalk]

Isaac: Yes, exactly. You're right, Margo. You said it, it's tempting. It's so tempting to make yourself the hero of your own story. I really tried to keep an eye out for that anytime I started. Sometimes you write it and then you can put it on the cutting room floor, and then you ask yourself, you reach into yourself and say, "What did you really do?" I know how I feel about myself as a person, and I don't feel that I'm a perfect person. I think I'm far from it.

In fact, sometimes I think many of us can probably relate to this. I'm a very harsh critic of myself. It's about finding the flaws in myself. I believe writing is beautiful and it's art, and it's all these things, but I'm also a deep believer that it should be entertaining. People are going to be interested in flaws, in mistakes. They want to know there are other people out there again, that feeling less alone thing, who have, excuse my language, but fucked up the way that they have. That's the quick answer for me, is I'm not interested in the essays that are like, "I'm great."

Bethanne: I hope I haven't read very many of those. Those are not the interesting pieces of writing out there in the world for me either. Nicole, how about you? How do you feel about this?

Nicole: I've just been nodding along the whole time, but especially that last question to everything Isaac and Margo said. I don't know. I tend to be, just as a person, pretty hard on myself. I have many flaws as a writer. This is not one I personally feel like I'm super susceptible to. I have, however, often I think, especially early on, it is very tempting to want to be like, "Not here is everything wrapped up in a bow," but I've asked a question.

I've always loved starting a piece or writing a piece where I've asked a question and I want the reader to accompany me on this journey while we talk through it. I feel like so much less pressure than I used to when I was younger to supply a firm answer. It's really been wonderful and liberating to realize, "No, we're not done." Whether it's an essay, or a chapter, or an entire book, we're not going to get to, "You don't always get to that firm answer. You don't always get to a sign and here's the way to go if you want everything to be great."

Maybe what I'm hinting at is, for me, I think I'm more tempted or used to be anyway to look for, not a lesson, but I don't know. Maybe a lesson. Maybe that's, actually, how I'm thinking about it. I don't feel any pressure anymore to supply those types of answers and that's been really helpful in my writing because life is just too complicated for that.

Bethanne: Margo, I don't want to spoil anything in anyone's books, even though, memoir is less spoilable than maybe a thriller, for example. One of the things I really loved at the end of constructing a nervous system, is you're talking about family, you're talking about your grandmother, and she had a nickname for you. Her nickname was Donkey. I loved the nickname because it just says so much about how we do need to keep going on. Margo, you were talking earlier about all of our versions of ourselves and how we keep changing and growing. A donkey just needs to keep going. That's it's purpose.

[laughter]

Margo: I like that. Yes, that's true. It'll bump into things. [laughs]

Bethanne: That's right. I thought, "Oh, this is--" I know better as a critic than to say, "I'm sure you intended that, Margo," but I also know that it just works so beautifully and it illustrates what everyone is saying about how you don't come to a fixed point at the end of a memoir.

Margo: No. I had an interesting experience in a seminar I teach called Cultural Memoir. I was asking the first day, my graduate students, "Well, just tell me what about this form interests you?" I was emphasizing cultural because I wanted them to be very aware of all the ways you can exist in a memoir. You can be a commentator, you can be a participant, you can be an observer, you can be an omniscient narrator, you can be minor character. One student, she said, "Well, I'm a fiction concentrator." She said, "I find endings incredibly hard. They're usually too simple. They're usually too virtuosic." She said, "I'm in a memoir course to learn more about how to write an ending." I'm like, "Oh."

Nicole: Interesting because endings are so hard.

Margo: Yes. I thought, "This is deep." All three of you have been talking about this business of the ending that's not an ending.

Nicole: Well, I think one thing that's so lovely about memoir is you can have this nice big open-end, forward-looking ending and you don't need things tied up. In a way, it wouldn't feel natural because as we've discussed, your life and the story are going on.

Margo: In some **[unintelligible 00:58:06]** it's provisional.

Nicole: Yes. Then what I also love about the genre is recognizing, yes, it's a particular story of what happened to you, but it's captured at this particular moment, at the time you're writing it. If you were to write it 10 years earlier or 30 years later, even if you covered the exact same events, it'd be a wildly different book, maybe with a different ending because you'd have those additional years or you wouldn't of perspective on the story. That's so interesting because I think memoirs are hard to end. At the same time, I do like the way the genre lends itself to a forward-looking thing.

Margo: Well, maybe she was saying in some way we're willing to engage with its complications more than she felt as a fiction writer she was doing.

Bethanne: As a critic-- Go ahead.

Isaac: Sorry. Did she finish the class? Do we know?

Margo: She's still there.

Isaac: This is ongoing?

Margo: Yes. That was the first-- [crosstalk]

Bethanne: We need to hear. We need an update, Margo.

[laughter]

Isaac: Yes, exactly. I want to hear how-- Sorry, there's no ending. **[unintelligible 00:59:10].**

[laughter]

Isaac: I want to know how it ends.

Margo: Yes, me too.

Bethanne: What I was going to say is that as a critic, one of the things with fiction that I've seen more and more over the past, let's say 10 to 12 years, are very lazy endings in fiction. Yes, I said it. Yes. I came out and said it.

Margo: People-- [crosstalk]

Nicole: You're a critic, so you can.

[laughter]

Bethanne: I'll read a novel and it will start out and it will go through, and it'll be fantastic, and then, whooo, fizzles. I think that Margo your student is onto something that, maybe this is-- I'm not saying it's a flaw of every fiction instructor or professor, but maybe it's something that memoir can really help fiction with.

Margo: Which we're always looking for ways to non-fiction's constant search for our utter respectability and triumph. [crosstalk]

Bethanne: That's right. Can we go? Let's raise that banner high.

[laughter]

Bethanne: Now, I think this is a really difficult question and if the three of you were just like, "We're not going there, Bethanne, that's fine." I think the question of what works for one culture and what doesn't work for another is really fascinating, particularly, a memoir. Here's why. Someone recently told me that they were teaching *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer and that the protagonist whose name is escaping me right now, I should know, Christopher, what was his name? Does anyone remember?

Anyway, the young man who winds up holding up in his van and dying in the Alaskan wilderness, that her class was all people of color. They were furious with this young man in the autobiography, in the non-fiction book. They said, "Why did he throw away supportive, loving, family members, all of the privileges he could have had so that he could go out on this individual adventure story? That is a waste. That is waste." I thought, "That is not something I've heard before." I was wondering in the communities, all of us are in, which are all very different. Some of us are in many all at once. Have you ever considered, and Margo, I think you must have in writing *Negroland,* what it means to be a good girl in one community and not a good girl in another?

Margo: I consider these things, yes, all the time. When I was growing up, you said I think, Nicole, that the good adoptee, when in '50s the good, well-mannered negro girl. There would be that, but the good negro 50s'. Again, I'm using this word because those were its peak years, the '40s and '50s. As a reviewer, I was constantly aware of these different audiences. I'd be writing too and writing chords.

Did I want to have to explain something that I knew one audience might get and the others wouldn't? I think about it all the time. I always assume, frankly, that I am speaking to-- I sometimes am speaking more intensely to one group than to another. I know that the points I'm making or the passages I'm writing will resonate in different ways, but its inflection, I would say.

In a certain way, I'm resigned to the fact that I'm going to be understood and misunderstood by everybody at some point. Just class, gender, race, which one is trying to personalize and make intimate as well as perhaps generalize about the-- Those are huge. The variety within that, when you spoke about this class in Jon Krakauer, I found I'd like to know a little more. What kind of school was it? What was

the social financial range among the students? There are a lot of variables even within that.

Bethanne: There are. Exactly right. I have to find out more about that. Now, I will report back as well.

Margo: It's very interesting. Yes.

Bethanne: [laughs] It is very interesting.

Isaac: Margo, I felt like that was a fascinating and absolutely on-the-money answer for the question. Not to follow up something very smart with a pop culture reference.

Margo: No? Hello?

Isaac: One of my favorite lines in the seminal '90s classic Wayne's World is, Led Zeppelin didn't make music everybody liked. They left that to the Bee Gees. [chuckles] That's a fun joke, but the real thing for me is, my favorite thing about writing and reading, and I'm going to misquote it here, but it's from a British play, *The History Boys.* The teacher is describing one of the incredible joys of reading, the powers of reading is, you can be reading and you'll come across a thought, or an idea, or a moment, or a desire, or anything that you've been quiet about. That you've held in your heart and you thought you were the only person that ever thought that.

As you read it, it's like a hand comes out of the book and grasps yours and you feel less alone. That's the beauty of writing and reading for me is, you write, that's an art form. Then reading is, basically, just two people coming together to make art. I can describe a bar and I know what the bar looks like because I lived in the bar for a long time. You are all going to picture your own version of a bar. It might be a bar that you lived at for a little while or maybe it's a bar that your mom was that a lot that you hated, who knows?

You're all going to bring your own memories and they interact with the words on the page and that's where the real magic happens. That's where the real story happens. In reference to your question, a little bit is one thing, I feel very lucky the criticism around my book has been lovely and kind. But listen, Led Zeppelin didn't make music everybody liked, right? I am one of those weird people that just reads anything.

I know that's maybe not the healthiest thing, but I'll read negative, I'll read positive. I just read it all. One thing we were talking just earlier about it's hard to know when to end. The other fun thing with memoir that you can play with, if you bring in time jumping, you can put different things in different places. Throughout my memoir, you hear a little bit about a dark childhood. I'll give you flashes of it, but I don't really get into it until the last essay.

I have read so many readers that were like, "If he had just mentioned that upfront, I would have had a lot more empathy for him throughout the middle. If he had just mentioned it in the front, I would have read that middle, I would have been less judgmental. Because he's put it at the end, this guy's a joke." I love that. It's, actually, something that I enjoy when I come across somebody like--

Sorry, this is just a quick story. One of my favorites. There's one guy, was one line. I have a story where I black out while riding a motorcycle, and the next day I give away the motorcycle. There's one person with one line just said, "He blacked out, rode a motorcycle, and the next day he gave up the motorcycle, dot, dot, dot, instead of giving up drinking." I was like, "That is it. I haven't even had that. That is an exceptional point."

Or it's like, Like in my book? I'm going to bring that into therapy. That's a very, very good point." Again, it just served as this perfect example of like they're going to take things away from your books that you didn't even intend, but yet they're still fascinating and interesting, and sometimes even misconstrued but it's part of it. Like Margo was saying, this is what we signed up for.

Bethanne: This is what we signed up for. Endings are really difficult and I do have to end this in a few minutes and I hate that because I just want to keep talking to all three of you but there's one last question. Maybe there'll be two, but at least one. There's one chapter I wrote of *Life Be,* that literally poured out of me after I listened to a particular song. It just completely unlocked that chapter. That doesn't mean the chapter doesn't have problems, that it didn't have problems, but sometimes that happens. I wanted to ask each of you, if there were a memory, or a smell, or a song, or some kind of walk, or motorcycle ride that unlocked a piece of a memoir for you. Nicole?

Nicole: Walks are huge for me. Whenever I'm really stuck, instead of just sitting there and staring at the screen and swearing, I just go for a long walk. I know that sounds a bit cliché, but the point is, I have to be away from the computer. I have to trick my brain into thinking, "We're not writing. We're not even trying to write. We're not even thinking about writing." Of course, as I walk, it's with me, because when you're deep in a book, especially, like a long project like that, it never really leaves you.

It's pretty easy when you step away to sync back in. Walks help me. They just shake something loose in me. Not athletic. Walking is the extent of my athletic activities, but there's pretty woods near my house that I would go into those all the time while writing the new book, *A Living Remedy*. It was on a walk one day where, speaking of endings, I wasn't even halfway done writing it, the first bad draft.

I was like, "I know how this book ends." Which is shocking to me because I wrote three different endings for *All You Can Ever Know,* and did not know until pretty much the end, what the end was. I had more than half of the book to write, but I was like, I saw the chapter, the final chapter so clearly. I went home and immediately outlined it so I would not forget, and jotted down specific moments or bits of conversation I wanted to include.

That, actually, made the rest of the drafting just slightly easier because I knew what I was writing toward. I understood what the ending was going to be. That's still my final chapter. I honestly really love it and I'm very critical, but I love it. It's partly because it came to me in that moment where I wasn't really trying. It was like an unmerited gift of grace, that moment. Walking always helps me.

Bethanne: [unintelligible 01:10:20] I love it, I love it. Isaac, Margo, anything for you?

Isaac: Walking, 100%. I'm right there with Nicole. For me? Oh, sorry--

Margo: No, I was just thinking two walkers. Okay, that's all right.

Isaac: I was thinking, I want Margo to speak less because I want to be--[crosstalk]

Margo: No. Not going. You take that walk.

Isaac: No, Nicole is 100% right with walking which is for me, the only thing I would add on is, I will see something-- I stare at my screen, it's more than just the temptation of the internet or anything else. Some people are like, "Oh, it just flows through me." For me, it's pulling teeth. I would do anything else if I could, but I just devoted my life to this. When I go out into the world, I'll see something, and that can spark just what Nicole--

Like staring at my screen, I know what my screen looks like. I'm not going to see anything that sparks something, but if I go out into the world, I will see some scene, some object, some plants, something that will spark something, and that usually helps. For me, the answer would be therapy. Therapy is the thing that changed this book and changed me. Without therapy, it would have been a much angrier book if I had written it younger, but it would have been a much less empathetic and not just the people in my life, but also to myself. I don't mean in that, "Oh, gee. Look at how good I am," but in the real, I have a better sense of who I am, flawed and all of it, and therapy was it for me.

Bethanne: Thank you. How about you, Margo?

Margo: I'm not so much of a walker, but I like exercise. Any kind of-- Not any kind of. Different kinds of music that can shut down one mood that I'm locked into and start off another. Sometimes, I need it to be, not even what I'm setting. I need it to be the radio and just, "Whoop. Okay, fine. I'm catapulted." That works best for me. Odd pieces of books like a paragraph that I love that I haven't thought of in ages.

Or suddenly a writer's rhythm will come into my head, and I say, "I'll go read that speech again from this player," that, that. You learn what your system needs. It's like biochemistry in a way. This book, constructing was so much about my engagements and clashes with and passions for pieces of music, a book, a work of art of whatever. That was constantly while I was writing it, setting me off, and then sending me on to associated art forms.

Bethanne: It's so amazing which sense or which learning style does help us along through this process. I have some questions that I thought I will get to because this way we can answer them. There's not a ton, but that way you can answer them at any length you want. Fortunately, I always have more questions of my own. There's not going to be a single moment wasted. I do love this question, "What are your writing habits and rituals?" Because I know people always want to know about them. This is a question that's been posed to us by an anonymous attendee. Anyone who'd like to start?

Margo: I used to write intensely in the morning and then do more reading and note-taking and whatever in the afternoon. My, again, biochemistry seems to be shifting a bit, and I'm able to do more real writing in the afternoon than I thought. Evenings, I don't write. I can take notes, but serious-- I can read for it, I can listen for it, but serious, serious writing, I'm no good at night. Rituals, we were talking about those. The things that set us off.

Bethanne: That's right.

Margo: Pieces of music, exercise. Sometimes, you just want to call somebody whose voice pleases, who'll say something that'll-

Bethanne: It's true.

Margo: -immediately make you laugh. It'll awaken something else in you.

Bethanne: Definitely. Nicole, how about you?

Nicole: I was just thinking about, my kids are older now, but I wrote the first book at least and part of the second when they were younger and most of the second during the pandemic when they were home all the time. I just wrote when I could. My favorite time of the day to write is late morning or early afternoon. Like you, Margo, I can read and revise pages a little bit in the evening. I have to stop by nine o'clock or ten o'clock, or I cannot go to sleep.

Margo: Exactly.

Nicole: I don't understand how people write really late and then falls-- I need a good one to two hour ideally dumb television, but maybe also reading [chuckles] buffer between me and sleep after work. I spent so many years while my kids were young just grabbing whatever spare moment there was. My routine is all over the place still. I've been thinking, "You could be more disciplined about this now." Then, I got a dog. My day is completely governed by her whims now. I don't know-- [crosstalk]

Bethanne: We're disciplined. [crosstalk]

Nicole: I usually write with silence. If I'm revising sometimes classical music because I can't have words in my head while I revise. Also, I like to read poetry either before-- Or I'll take a poetry break and it helps me because poetry's beautiful and it's magic. I don't understand how poets do what they do. It also helps me remember like, "Oh, we can say one shorter thing. We can home in on one memory, or one moment, or one feeling or one sensation." If I'm really stuck, poetry helps shake me loose because I think, "Okay, what's the next moment?" I don't have to think so big. [crosstalk]

Bethanne: Excellent.

Isaac: That's perfect. For me, it is about breaking it up. Like I was saying earlier, writing is not something that comes easily to me. That's because I think for a long time, I just had this idea of what I thought writing was and I thought, one, it wasn't craft, it wasn't something you could get better at. I thought you either had it or you didn't. I thought it was like a gift from God.

I was lucky enough that in my early 20s', I started to be around people who showed me that through community, through reading a lot, through conversation, through showing your very bad writing to trusted friends who will give you honest feedback, but encouraging feedback, and not just trump on your dreams. That it was something you could become better at because before that--

Bethanne: Right. I could this.

Isaac: I had this picture-- Before I had any other furniture, I had this desk because I was like, "That's where I'll do it" That desk is just covered in clothes all the time because, for me, it's about what Nicole was saying earlier with walking, I take notebooks and I go out into the world. I'm like Margo as well or at least your privy-- I haven't mastered writing in the afternoon yet. Definitely, can't do evenings. I got the juice in the morning. My first thing, I try to get up and just get out into the world, and I'll carry a notebook and I will just write.

That's because again, in front of a screen, like temptation, I write one sentence and I want to make it that poetry sentence instead of just letting it be because I got so many other-- If I have a notebook, scribble, scribble, scribble my spelling mistakes. There's no red lines or green lines telling me that I'm doing it wrong. I just scribble, scribble, scribble, scribble out in the world. Then, I come back and that's when I can transcribe my own handwritten notes. That's my first review. That's my first type of editing. If you're somebody who finds yourself getting in a bit of writer's block at a word processor, there's nothing wrong with that old long hand.

Margo: That's right.

Bethanne: Nothing wrong with it. It was really interesting to me. I've only been to one residency thus far. I hope I have the good fortune to go to another. At VCCA, the thing that made me laugh the most in the three weeks I was there, is that all of the writers were on the exact same schedule. We were always up at breakfast, chat, chat. At lunchtime, every writer you could tell was using their beds in their studios to take a nap.

The writers were the first ones into dinner. Meanwhile, the sculptors, the composers, the painters might roll out of bed at noon, just get going at around five o'clock, have some wine, go back to their studios. The writers were in bed, lights out 10:00 PM. I just thought if there's something about writing and that juice in the morning, as Isaac said, and as Margo said, I don't know what it is, but it really does work for so many writers.

Now, Nika Mavrody asks, "How does the genre of memoir connect to the practice of literary biography?" I just want to say really quickly that I don't know, I can write a memoir, but I know a literary biography. I'm going to leave that to really smart people like the woman who wrote Heather Clark, who wrote *Red Comet* about Sylvia Plath. [laughs] All I know is-- [crosstalk]

Margo: There's also the woman who wrote the Carson McCullers. Carson McCullers, née.

Bethanne: Yes. Of course, Ruth Franklin's Shirley Jackson biography. Literary, biography is amazing, but I don't know if there's-- I don't know. I'm sure there are people who have written both.

Margo: I wonder what the questionnaire, I wonder what Nika herself would say about that? Probably having taught both, possibly.

Bethanne: I'm not sure if Nika is here to chat at us or ask another question.

Isaac: I can take a quick cred.

Bethanne: Yes, please.

Isaac: Again, I want to be clear, again, I want to say, no rules. I'm only speaking for myself. That goes all the way back-- Earlier I was like, "I don't have the imagination for fiction." That doesn't mean many memoirs have incredible imaginations, but this goes into a similar answer. My next book is, actually, going to be all about Johnny Appleseed. I know. Hold your applause. Let me tell you.

Bethanne: No. [laughs]

Margo: I'm cool.

Isaac: The man was wild. Not to give away the-- There's going to be a lot of other stuff in the book, a lot of his spirituality speaks to me. One, if you were raised on him, you were taught, "Oh, apple tarts, apple pies. He was feeding the early pioneers all this stuff." It turns out no. The apples were so tart while women described them as, they would make a blue jay scream and they were only used for one thing and that was alcohol. That's a fun fact.

Bethanne: That is a fun fact.

Isaac: It's a fun fact that I can run with use as an excuse to go walk around Ohio and Indiana in a bunch of random places making a story that I can tell about myself, and the people I meet along the way. I do not have, just like, I don't have that imagination, I do not have the deep research capabilities to do a Ron Chernowesque literary biography that will be turned into a musical about John Chapman, A.K.A Johnny Appleseed.

With memoir, I can take fun facts and weave them into a story that I then, myself, go out and live. I don't know if that answers the question, but that is, for me, I love a library. I love it, but I can't live in it. I need to be out into the-- For me, memoir is about making sure something is happening to me that I can then put on the page as opposed to figuring out a beautiful way to write somebody else's life.

Margo: If you are obsessed with them, then you are channeling yourself through, all the details, all the archival, but also you are using your imagination, and that must feel very powerful and fascinating.

Nicole: Like a lot of the--

Bethanne: Also, Isaac-- [crosstalk] Sorry. Sorry, Nicole.

Nicole: No, sorry. You go.

Bethanne: I was just going to say, it's clear that, Margo, actually, lives in a library, so I just want you to apologize to her.

Margo: They were going to go, but then-- [crosstalk]

Bethanne: I'm sorry, Nicole, please go ahead.

Nicole: I was just going to say, I think I have also not written literary biography, although I was a History Major, and I really love libraries and archives, and I would love to write research-reported non-fiction sometime. I have but in short form. I guess I would just say like, it's still about the story. If it's a literary biography, what it has in common with memoir or a novel or anything else, or the basic building blocks of that story characterization, and scene, and arc, and all of that.

I think you use a lot of the same skills and a lot of the same toolkit, but it's in service of a different thing, which is putting this very particular person's story out there. Making it compelling, making it real, and obviously telling the truth, which is more common ground with memoir.

Bethanne: This is so great because the next question is from an anonymous attendee, how important is truth?

Nicole: That's everything, but it's also subjective.

Margo: I would say truths.

Nicole: Right. Exactly. You're--

Margo: With a big S. Yes.

Nicole: Yes. You're always getting-- [crosstalk]

Margo: Like a loose perspective. I'm sorry go ahead, Nicole.

Nicole: I'm so sorry. I was going to say you're getting the author's perspective. You're getting their truth and it's an author's obligation in memoir to tell the truth, but they can only really do it from their perspective no matter how much you research a reporter, try to bring in other people's memories, or thoughts, or perspectives, it's still, ultimately, you're the writer and you're the one deciding what stays and what goes, like what's important and what isn't.

What I always think about when I read a memoir is, I don't imagine I'm getting the whole truth. I know I'm getting just a piece of it, like of the writer's view, and there are all these vistas that I won't ever see, but I still funded a really beautiful thing to have that one truth.

Margo: To be able to discern between and be given. There's factual truth, there's emotional memory truth, there's imaginative truth. There are all kinds. There's psychological, psychoanalytic, therapeutic truth. In a memoir you can render all of those. They're all your tools. They're lies amidst all of them too.

Isaac: Yes. That's to speak to the line part of it, but truly like that is how important is truth and I see that the questioner did put it in quotes themselves as well. I think the answer is right there in your own grammatical usage of quotes and everything that Nicole and Margo just said so eloquently and beautifully. The one thing I'd add the case of that memoir I would've written when I was 25 wouldn't have been a lie. Wouldn't have been a lie. I was that angry. I did feel that betrayed, it wouldn't have been a lie. I think to steal Nicole's use of vistas or maybe it was Margo, I'm sorry, but--

Margo: No, that was Nicole. She got the vistas.

Isaac: Yes. I saw more vistas and so my truth, it was still true back then, but it has changed a little bit. That is something I think that a book or a memoir really does. It captures that truth, the author's truth as they both just said, in that moment, and even that can change.

Bethanne: Absolutely. There are two more questions. I'm going to just read one because I want to make sure I don't miss it. Janet Baldwin from Tacoma Park, Maryland, says, "Nicole, adoptees unite. I feel a connection with you as a fellow adoptee. Every adopted person has a unique experience. Yet, is there a commonality by virtue of the fact of being raised by people you are not related to. If so, what is it?"

Nicole: Thank you so much. I always love to hear. I think you've named the common ground, right? There are a million different adoptee experiences. There's no like one universal one. Just like there's no one truth like we've been talking about, but I don't know. I think the main thing I feel when I meet and talk with fellow adoptees, including adoptees who are writers, is just this sense of not being alone and being reminded that there are so many of us.

Maybe another common experience is we often grew up feeling alone, caught between maybe two different families or cultures, or just not knowing other people with the same type of family experience. Yes, I don't know. I always feel a kinship with fellow adoptees and maybe that's where it comes from, is from that sense of isolation growing up and then realizing, "Oh, actually we're legion. There are so many of us." One of the great honors of being able to publish my first book has just been hearing from so many adoptees from the age of 12 to 95. It's meant a great deal to me.

Bethanne: Thank you. Someone who is anonymous, again, asks, "How and when do you start a memoir? Interesting Ancestors, David Copperfield, *Chapter One,* I am born," excuse me. "Good or bad childhood school experiences, first professional experience, and when do you end?" Now, we did talk about endings already, so I'm going to just ask very quickly for the three of you to talk about starting.

Isaac, of course, you have an amazing first line. I know you've talked about that many times, but any of the three of you who wants to take that on, this is going to have to be our last question, unfortunately. There's others coming up and they're just fantastic, but I'm sorry everyone, we have to end at 8:30 so.

Margo: There's no one way to start. You start with what flames up in you. You start with what will keep you going. That's what you start with. It could change, but just start with what is like, "Boom. Got to do it." Put it on the page.

Nicole: Yes. I used to work as an editor and writers would pitch me sometimes five different things at once and I would be like, "Okay, I've got my idea about what I'm most interested, but tell me what is most exciting to you? What's the most urgent thing for you?" That's where you start.

Bethanne: Isaac, any last word?

Isaac: No. I think that is absolutely it. What makes you just flash in that way and then you just keep going and keep going, because know that that first thing you might write might end up being your ending. It might end up on the chopping floor, it might-- Who knows, but the important thing is that you start. You don't put it off till tomorrow. If you want to take on a writing project, whether it be a personal essay, something small, a poem or something as long and as large as a book, you start putting one foot in front of the other because that's the only way you're going to get to where you want to go.

Bethanne: Thank you. Thank you all so much and I wish we could go on further-

Margo: Thank you.

Bethanne: -and further.

Nicole: Thank you, Bethanne.

Bethanne: This was wonderful. I am going to ask all three of you to stay with us for a couple of minutes, and I am going to bring our Development Director from Penn Faulkner, Caroline Schreiber, onto the stage. We're going to talk for a moment about ways that all of you can contribute to the interesting, literary work that we're doing. Caroline, please.

Caroline Schreiber: Thanks, Bethanne, and thank you to all of our writers for sharing your stories and your enthusiasm tonight. This has been such a great conversation, honestly. I've had fun listening. Like Bethanne said, my name is Caroline Schreiber and I'm the Director of Development here at Penn Faulkner. As you might know Penn Faulkner engages thousands of readers and writers and students just like you through programs just like this one every year.

Penn Faulkner is, of course, a nonprofit, so we do rely on donations from supporters like you to accomplish our work. If you're able to give, we hope you'll make a contribution today. They'll be a link in the chat. Every dollar counts and every dollar helps us to connect you with incredible writers like the ones you've heard from tonight. Thank you. I'm also here to invite you to several upcoming Pen Faulkner events. Next up in our literary conversation season is collaboration. That'll be a conversation with two different teams of writers about what it takes to work together to create a story. We hope you'll join us online again for that conversation on March 23rd. Again, there'll be a link in the chat and I believe in your inboxes tomorrow about signing up to attend that.

Then, finally, last but not least, on May 11th, we are celebrating our 43rd annual Penn Faulkner Award for fiction. We're back to an in-person event this year, which is so exciting for us after all of these Zoom events and several celebrations online over the pandemic. We'll be celebrating at the newly renovated and really beautiful MLK Library in downtown D.C. The evening will feature our award winner, our finalists, our judges, and this year's Penn Faulkner literary champion, NPR host, Terry Gross.

Sponsorships are on sale now. The link is in the chat. Again, check your chat. You can also sign up through that link to receive a notification as soon as we put single tickets on sale later this spring. We hope you'll do that so that we can get to you as soon as possible. It's going to be a fantastic evening. We really hope you'll join us for that celebration. Thank you again to Bethanne, to Nicole, to Isaac, to Margo. We so appreciate you all being here and chatting tonight. To everyone else, we hope we'll see you again soon and goodnight.

Margo: Thank you. [crosstalk]

Isaac: I can do it again, I just craft--

Nicole: Thank you, everybody.

Isaac: Penn Faulkner does make stuff for students, you should donate.

[laughter]

Bethanne: Totally. [laughs]

Margo: Good night, everyone.

[01:33:29] [END OF AUDIO]