

Literary Conversation: Collaboration

March 23, 2023

Gwydion Suilebhan: Good evening. I'm Gwydion Suilebhan, PEN/Faulkner's Executive Director, and as it happens, I am also a writer who works with a co-author so I am really excited about tonight's conversation. Before we get started, 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 just like this one. Our mission is to champion the breadth and power of fiction in America. Tonight, we are very lucky to be hearing from four different authors whose work contributes a lot to that breadth and power.

We have Christine Pride and Jo Piazza, co-authors of the novel *We Are Not Like Them*. Christine is a writer, editor, and longtime publishing veteran who has worked at Double Day Broadway, Crown Hyperion, Simon & Schuster. Jo, her co-author, is a best-selling and award-winning writer, podcaster, and journalist whose other novels and non-fiction books include *Charlotte Walsh Likes to Win*, *The Knockoff*, and *How to Be Married*. Great Titles.

We also have Shaunna J. Edwards and Alyson Richman, co-authors of *The Thread Collectors*. Shaunna is a former corporate lawyer who works in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and *The Thread Collectors* is her debut, which is very exciting. Alyson is the author of several bestselling historical novels, including *The Velvet Hours*, *The Garden of Letters*, and *The Lost Wife*, which is currently in development for a major motion picture.

To my great delight, our moderator tonight is none other than PEN/Faulkner board member, novelist, essayist, and book reviewer, Martha Anne Toll, who's debut novel, *Three Muses*, won The Petrarch prize for Finely Crafted Fiction and is currently a finalist for the Gotham Book Prize. With that, Martha, I turn it over to you.

Martha Anne Toll: Gwydion, thank you so much and I am absolutely delighted to have everybody here. I think if I could ask our panelists to turn on their cameras and unmute yourself, let's stay unmuted unless we get a lot of buzzes, but I think we'll be okay. Thanks to Gwydion and thanks to our wonderful PEN/Faulkner staff, which includes Gwydion and Sarah Silverman, Brooke, who's doing captions, and Alina, who's also supporting this wonderful panel. Thank you.

Everybody's here. At least I can see them, so hopefully, everybody can see you. This concept was new to me. I'm a fiction writer and I found it unimaginable to be able to collaborate with anybody. I can't even collaborate with myself half the time so I'm super excited to talk with all of you and we're going to have a lively conversation.

I think before we start, we're going to have these two teams just frame up their books for us. The first book that we're going to have framed up is called *The Thread Collectors*. My understanding from Alyson and Shaunna is that Shaunna is the person who's going to do that. Thank you.

Shaunna Edwards: I am voluntold. I'm happy to do that. Martha, thank you so much for having me today. In *The Thread Collectors*, you meet two couples. The first couple is a Black couple comprised of Stella. Stella is enslaved and she is in New Orleans and she is harvesting repurposed thread and cloth and she's secretly making these maps for enslaved men to join the Union Army, to flee and join the Union Army.

She's in love with William. He is a brilliant Black musician. He is also enslaved, so they're not free to be together. William decides he's going to run, and on the battlefields of Louisiana, he meets Jacob Kling, who is a German Jewish musician who has been encouraged to join the Union Army by his fiery abolitionist wife, Lily Kling, who's up in New York. I always laugh a little bit because Lily is described to look a lot like my beautiful co-author [laughs] Alyson.

Lily's doing some sewing of her own. She's joined a quilting circle and in this quilting circle she's finding camaraderie and she's also doing her part to fund the Union Army cause. While the men's friendship is the central aspect of this book, it really opens you up to how these four lies, people who have different backgrounds, face, races, heritages have more in common than you might have thought at the beginning of the book.

Martha: Thank you. I just wanted to read the brief epitaph that's at the beginning of your book. If you don't know where you're going, you should know where you come from, from a Gullah, Geechee proverb. I just love that so I want to share that with our audience. Thank you. Then Jo and Christine wrote this book also highly recommended called *We Are Not Like Them*. I'm not sure how you're going to do it but could you frame it up for us. Thank you.

Jo Piazza: Sure. I'll go. *We Are Not Like Them* is also the story of two women. One of them is white, one of them is Black. Riley and Jen have been best friends since they were little girls growing up in Philadelphia. They're finally reunited again as adults. They're living in Philly for the first time since they were kids and they're so excited about their reunion when all of a sudden Jen gets a phone call.

Jen's husband is a cop. We soon learn that her husband, Kevin, has shot an unarmed Black teenager, and Riley, who is the Black woman in our book, is a news journalist who is then forced to cover this story as the reporter. The book follows their reckoning with this terrible situation in Philadelphia, but also their reckoning between one another as they grapple with race within their relationship for the very first time.

Martha: Thank you. While we're talking with Christine and Jo, could you describe how you met each other and decided to write this book?

Christine Pride: Yes. I will tell our meet cute which is really fun actually in that I was Jo's editor for her last book. We mentioned at the top of the hour, one of the titles, *Charlotte Walsh Likes to Win*, Jo and I worked together on that book when I was

working full-time at Simon & Schuster which is a great book. We had such a great working relationship and then we actually did this really fun tie-in to the show *Younger*.

I'm sure we have some people in our audience who are literary folks that also like this TV show set in a publishing world. We did Italian novel for a book that came out, was actually published on the show in season five, and published in Real Life by Simon & Schuster, and that book needed to be written and in six weeks. Jo and I partnered on that and really were in the trenches in a Google Doc over the holidays writing together and that really formed the seat of a partnership. We just had so much fun doing it. When we were finished we were like, how can we work together again and so we figured out a way to do so.

Martha: Love that. How about Shaunna and Alyson? How did you meet each other?

Alyson Richman: Well, we met a little over 13 years ago in, I like to say, in the most unlikely of places. I think Shaunna doesn't think it's so unlikely, but we met in Las Vegas.

[laughter]

Shaunna: That's not unlikely to me.

Alyson: I had just potty trained my last child. I hadn't been on vacation in something like six years and my husband was invited to an all-expense-paid corporate retreat in Las Vegas and Shaunna in her other life as a corporate attorney. The evening of the opening reception, I was standing online at the bar and all these aggressive male attorneys were cutting in front of me, eager to get a martini.

I was letting them and I was just daydreaming, happily just to be dressed and not have spit up on my shoulder. All of a sudden, this beautiful woman comes walking over and looks at me and says, "Why are you letting every single man-

Martha: [laughs]

Alyson: -in front of you? By the way, I like your dress." I say the part about the dress because Shaunna and I are always, even like *The Thread Collectors*, there's a lot of dresses in *The Thread Collectors*. Shaunna, you're right, you knew how [unintelligible 00:11:18] the fish out of water.

Shaunna: I knew that she was not a lawyer. She didn't have that sharp, desperate look that we sometimes have, but I asked her what she did, she said she was a writer. I majored in literature in college and so for me, Alyson was like a real-life unicorn to be friends with an author. Over time, our friendship has just been cemented in a love of books so that's how we met. It's not necessarily how *The Thread Collectors* came about, but it's been a great ride so far.

Martha: Great. Thank you. Throughout the broadcast today, we're going to hear sections from the book, each of the books. I think what I'll do is ask Christine and Jo to read a piece of your book if you would set it up for us, but before you do that, could you talk about how you came up with this idea and figured out how to divide the work, which might have been an iterative process? I'm not sure.

Christine: I'll talk about the idea because Jo's going to be up first for reading or excerpt. This was, like I said, just had come after we had collaborated on this other project and we're going back in time to 2018, 2017 [crosstalk]--

Jo: 2017, yes.

Christine: 2017. Years and years ago. I had had this idea really in the back recesses of my mind as a book editor, which I had been for 20 years prior to becoming a writer. As an editor, you're always thinking about ideas that you want to see in the world or books that need to be written. Usually, you're whispering that idea to a writer. You're not embarking on doing it yourself, but this was in the day and age, which actually does not feel like ancient history and is not ancient history when we were seeing so many headlines about police violence.

The idea that I had and Jo and I both love a ripped-from-the-headlines concept was what if a real-life friendship we made a fictional friendship was affected by a police shooting. How could we get into the lives of real people and real characters in a really intimate way that take this broad and hot-button and fraud issue and bring it down to really intimate level? Then the idea of partnering with each other felt like a novel concept too, because we could bring our different experiences as a Black woman and a white woman to the table. We always say that the concept is the concept, but if I wrote it solo, it would be a very different book than if Jo wrote it solo.

The beauty of this book is that we could really merge and draw from and leverage those different perspectives. It both seemed like a really timely and urgent idea. Again, this was two years before George Floyd and our great racial reckoning. It also seemed like a really interesting approach into the subject matter. Both of those proved to be so irresistible that Jo and I like to say, I came to her and in effect proposed and she said, yes, and here we are.

Martha: Wonderful.

Jo: She did propose. We regularly renew our vows, decide to write another book.

Christine: Book after book after book.

Jo: Book after book. We have to choose each other over and over again. Once that started, we began with a very robust outline as we do with each project that we work on together, which is completely different from the way that I work alone when I'm writing fiction on my own, I am flying by the seat of my pants. That gives Christine hives. It really does. She freaks out every time I say it. She's like, "I just can't imagine."

Christine: You need a plan. I need a plan.

Jo: Whereas I'm like, "I know what's going to happen, but not really. I'm just going to see where it goes." I sit down and write 2,000, 3,000 words a day. Then months later a book appears. I had no idea that that was going to happen. That's crazy. Christine and I do an outline together and we work in Google Docs, which also gave her hives in the beginning. She lost her mind because we have a lot of publishing people on here probably, and publishing loves Word. They just love Microsoft Word so much. I

could not imagine trading back 1,000 of Word documents. I was like, "We would always be in the wrong document. What would we name them?"

Our first fight was over, how will we write, how will we do this? Christine compromised very kindly and we collaborate in there. Once we have the outline, which we talk through together, we create together, we really just write whenever each of us has time. We don't feel that either of us owns a single character, but rather we are just like, "Oh, okay, yes, I'm really feeling this chapter where Riley's going on air and I've got a spare five hours today to sit down and start writing it." Then we'll trade it off with the other one. The other one goes in and edits it and reworks it. We just keep going back and forth like that until it gets to the place, whatever that place might be.

Martha: I feel like we're definitely going to listen to you read. I feel like Alyson and Shaunna, you've got to step in here and talk about that. If you want to ask the other team questions, you definitely should, but we'd love to hear how you do it. Seriously, happy to talk amongst yourselves if that's better.

Alyson: I'm just laughing about the Google Docs because I think [unintelligible 00:17:08] thought we had this brilliant epiphany, we could do this in Google Docs I've never worked in it before and I like Jo and also Christine we know publishing only likes Word, so I've always done Word. There's no need to do Google Docs before. Shaunna and I write from the beginning when we decided to write this novel, we knew that we wanted to create one seamless narrative voice.

That would mean both of us having access to the same document, being able to go in there and change something but see what the other person was changing so that it wasn't like you were the end all be all of changing something. Also leaving notes. There was something beautiful about leaving messages like, "I'm not sure about this, or could you do this?" That was really beautiful.

Martha: Great. [crosstalk]

Christine: I'm nodding a lot because it's funny and I think this will emerge in this conversation, but it's really interesting degree to which there are so many overlaps in terms of how you collaborate and the notes thing definitely resonate with us because it's always fun to read the comments. Also the divergences, I'm sure we have so many parts of our process that are so different and so specific to how two people work together. No two marriages are the same. No two collaborations are the same. It's really fascinating.

Martha: Very cool. Jo, it's going to be you who reads a piece of your book and please set it up for us.

Jo: We thought it would be fun for us to read from each character's perspective of them seeing their friend for the first time in the book or the first time that they're really describing them. I'm going to read Riley's part. Riley again, as I said is the television journalist. She is the Black character in our book and Christine's going to read Jen's part. She's the cop's wife she's a stay-at-home homemaker. She's the white woman in our book.

I wanted to throw this out there since not only did we have collaborative pairs here, but we also have interracial pairs here, it's very interesting when Christine and I do events and we've gone to a couple of hundred book clubs at this point since the book came out, people are very quick to assume that we segregated our writing based on-- They're like, "Christine must have written all of the Black characters' parts and Jo must have written all of the white characters' parts." I'm curious to hear what you guys think after we do the readings, but we think that's so interesting because there's so many facets of our characters that don't have to do with race.

Yes, race informs so much of who they are, but they're also daughters and mothers and friends. Riley's a reporter, which has been my profession for 20 years. There's so much that each of us could contribute to the characters. It's always strange to us that people who read it assume and even go further. They're like, "So, you are Riley."

Christine: You are the person. I was going to add that.

Jo: You are Jen. [crosstalk] I'm like, "I really don't want to be Jen."

Martha: That's just a fiction writer's risk [crosstalk]-

Christine: Yes, totally.

Martha: -get to the fact, to the class issues because in your book, Riley, the Black Woman I read it as being more upper-class. Jen, better educated and just more access to resources, which I loved about your book, but go ahead, Jo. We'll come back to that.

Jo: It's the same feeling when I spot Jen sitting at the bar. It takes me several double-takes to recognize my oldest friend. She's chopped off her long hair, so it ends right at her chin. In the three decades I've known her, she's never once had short hair. She looks like a stranger. Without even meaning to I edit the scene to a more familiar site. Jen's long dirty blonde hair streaming down her back smelling like the lavender herbal essences shampoo she's faithfully used since middle school. She and I haven't seen each other as much as we promised we would when I moved home and it's all my fault.

The new job has consumed me, but seeing her now, I'm hit with a rush of love. Jenny, I stopped to watch her for a moment, a habit from when we were little girls. Back then I thought if I studied her enough, I could train myself to be more like her, breezy, outgoing, fearless, but that never happened. Turns out you don't outgrow yourself. Though she's not classically pretty, she once joked she's trailer trash hot. A poor man's **[unintelligible 00:21:52]**.

Men have always been drawn to her, like this guy she's flirting with at the bar who's leaning in a little too close despite Jen's wedding ring. I take a few steps in her direction and stop short when Jen turns ever so slightly. There poking out from her black tunic is a round stomach, like the hair this startles me though it shouldn't. This pregnancy may not have even happened without my help, but I'm still getting used to the idea that Jen is having a baby. As of sensing me, Jen turns around and shouts, "Laurel Wilson, get your butt over here."

Martha: Thank you. Christine, do you want to go ahead with-

Christine: Oh, should I read now? Oh, yes, I didn't know we were going back to back for sure.

Martha: Sure.

Christine: I am up and again, here I am reading. This is after they've met at the bar and Jen has gone back home. It's funny to see how our friendship so obvious to us has always confused other people. They see a tall, elegant Black woman and a short scrawny blonde and think, "These two?" If it hadn't been for Lou's, that's Jen's mother, Lou's desperation to hand me off, we probably wouldn't have become friends.

I can credit a flyer in a laundromat for one of the most important relationships of my life. Lou barely 22 at the time was tending bar in the center city at **[unintelligible 00:23:18]** for the lunch shift and happy hour and working the ticket counter at the Trocadéro at night when the old lady who lived upstairs and usually watched me up and died. That's how Lou always described it all bitter. She up and died on me as if Ms. Landis did it on purpose to screw with her.

It did since Lou didn't have any other childcare options. It's not like she could drop me with my dad. I'd never met the guy who knocked up my mom her junior year of high school. "You were an immaculate conception. I'm essentially the Virgin Mary," Lou always said whenever I asked about him. Satisfied that this was a sufficient explanation, which it wasn't obviously. I wouldn't have put it past Lou to leave me alone with some dry cereal in a tightly locked door but a few days after Ms. Landis died, she came across the ad for Gigi's Daycare, Sunshine Kids, a place that specialized and taken in the scrubs. The kids whose parents worked odd hours or late nights.

I got such a kick out of it. We showed up at the Wilsons and saw those Black kids. Lou told me years later, they were like a snowflake in a corn mine. I thought maybe you'd all form a little rap group. I don't remember noticing that I was the only white kid at Gigi's, at least not at first. I was too focused on Riley though then she was called Leroya and I thought her name sounded so fancy like a perfume.

She was sitting at the kitchen table fighting her lip in concentration as she practiced writing her name. Her hair was braided into intricate cornrows that I wanted to touch so bad. When I did, Riley swatted at my hand and I knew I had done something wrong, even if I didn't know what it was. I tried everything I could think of to convince her to come play with me that day.

She kept blowing me off until the other kids started holding relay races in the backyard. Out of nowhere, Riley walked up and challenged me to one. She might have had longer legs, but I knew I was faster. I took off across the yard, pumping my skinny legs as fast as I could. Then to the last second, I slowed down and Riley won. She wasn't even happy about it. She accused me of letting her win.

I only did it because I wanted her to like me. We argued about it faces red little fist balled at our side until Gigi marched across the yard and turned the ice-cold hose on

us. "That'll kick you off from fussing." We fell to the ground, sopping wet in shock, and looked at each other and started laughing. That's when we knew we'd be friends. Even with that rocky start, we became inseparable. The sisters, both of us always wanted.

Martha: Love that. Thank you so much. Alyson and Shaunna, your book takes place in history, I mean, further back in history around the time before and during the Civil War. Can you talk to us about how you came up with the idea and how you did your research?

Alyson: Absolutely. Shaunna, should I start with?

Shaunna: Absolutely, yes.

Alyson: The idea for *The Thread Collectors* came in different parts. I guess growing up from my grandmother I had heard stories that on my maternal line, I had two great, great great uncles who were sons of Jewish or German immigrants who came over in the 1830s and that these two great, great, great uncles that I had fought on opposite sides during the Civil War. One of them went down to Sartoria, Mississippi and opened up a mercantile depot while his younger brother, Jacob Lang remained in New York.

When the war broke out, they enlisted on opposite sides. According to my grandmother, this permanently divided our family forever. The brothers never healed their relationship. She used to joke around and say, my mother used to-- my great-grandmother used to say that that's how the family was all Baptist now. As a novelist, that was always in the back of my mind that it would be a very interesting fraternal relationship to mine, these two brothers who were divided by the war, but who are immigrants themselves, outsiders themselves.

I just thought that would be very-- an interesting idea. Fast forward to 2017, I was meeting Shaunna for drinks in the city, and Shaunna always asked me what my next book idea was. She was always very curious about that. She also, because our friendship was cemented in our mutual love of books, she was always that litmus test that I would say, "I have this idea. I don't know if there's something there. What do you think?"

In 2017, I shared with her a little bit about my family's story, but also the fact that I had just seen on PBS Ric Burns' documentary, *Death and the Civil War*. In that documentary, I mean, he highlights so much about what happened with the enormous amount of dead during the Civil War that was over 600,000 men perished in America on the battlefield and what happened when these bodies fell and needed to be buried.

One of the things he highlighted was that 180,000 Black men who enlisted to fight for freedom, instead of being given muskets to fight, they were given pick axes and hoes and forced to do all menial and demeaning work like digging trenches and latrines, but also burying the Civil War dead, which were the white soldiers. Another thing that the documentary highlighted was that because the dead had to be buried so quickly, sometimes maps were created by fellow soldiers for their fallen compatriots in the hope that after the war, these maps where they sketched out on

the backs of envelopes or in diaries and in their journals where their friends had been buried.

They hoped to get that back to the family so that after the war, the bodies could be exhumed and buried properly up North. I said to Shaunna, I have this idea of perhaps weaving in my own family history, but also this friendship, this unexpected friendship on the battlefield, perhaps between a Jewish soldier and a Black soldier. Perhaps a map is created by the Black soldier and eventually, that map gets up North to the wife of the Jewish soldier and Shaunna immediately, you had a reaction to this idea.

Shaunna: I did. I had a very strong reaction. I thought it was fascinating. I am a southerner. I am a native Louisianan. Don't worry, we're not giving any spoilers away. As you might imagine, I focused on the Black soldier. Because I was curious as to this character, but also wanted to make sure that he wasn't just a device to move the plot along. I thought about it and I said, "Well, what if he takes this map and he gives this map to his beloved and she creates something more tactile and more visual?"

I think that came into my mind for a lot of different reasons. First of all, the way we were speaking about this soldier, he would've been enslaved, although plenty of free Black men fought in the Civil War, which means he wouldn't have been literate. It's not going to be a traditional map. I also come from a line of women who are quilt makers. I am not a quilt maker.

I always say, "Do not ask me to join your quilting circle. I cannot do it." I have these beautiful heirlooms of quilts. For me, that idea of the African American tradition of textile and doing something more with these remnants was very much front of mine. I shared this with Alyson, and we were in the same way back machine, we're in 2017, not thinking that I was pitching in any way. Oh, and by the way, bestselling author, bring me along for the ride. We were just two girlfriends having a chat about potentially her next project.

Alyson: Fast forward to 2020, I didn't end up writing the book in 2017. I ended up writing a different book. I feel that it's because something in the constellation, the stars was telling me to wait. I always feel there's a wind in your back that tells you, "This is the book you need to be writing now," and I didn't feel that in 2017 but fast forward to 2020 when we were in the throes of the pandemic and the world was feeling so fragile.

Then on top of that, the brutal murder of George Floyd, where now the world seems so broken and fractured, and really the parallels of the Civil War and the divisiveness in our country felt like it was really coming to the forefront. I started to return to the idea of the book, wanting to write it and wanting to find a place to put my emotions and to explore that part of history and try and make sense of it.

When I thought back of my conversation with Shaunna, I was very conscious of the fact that she didn't just say, "That sounds like a great idea. You should really write that book." She was building story with me right from the beginning. She was already contributing and making it a much more layered, interesting book showing me perspectives that I would never have considered.

I knew that Shaunna had always dreamt of wanting to write her own book. I also knew she's one of my most brilliant friends. I called her up and I said, "Would you consider writing this novel with me?" Shaunna, you were, I think a lot of it was a little crazy.

Shaunna: I'm sure that we'll speak about this more but both of our books really deal with very difficult subjects that it's very difficult to delve into. I did not know if I could just jump in that with both feet, not only just as a debut novelist but as a woman of color at that time in 2020 taking on something that really felt cataclysmic. It took me a while but I'm so glad that I did it. I don't know if Alyson and I would consider it a quite proposal, we're more like sisters. I don't think of us as more of a marriage. We are chosen family right now.

Martha: I think we're here. I think we should open that subject up. I do want to say that I absolutely loved the theme of the threads. I just thought it was the coolest thing and that the communication through these beautiful hands-on maps that people didn't suspect were something else. It's very beautiful and I love that it's in the title. Let's open this subject up. Several of you have talked about the fact, let's talk about book groups first in audiences because we had a pretty robust conversation about that in our session when we first met each other.

The segregation of audiences, the expectations. I don't really want to call on you. I think you can talk amongst yourselves. If everybody talks at once then I'll play teacher but I really want to hear about this because it's a subject that's really really important, I think. Christine, can I call on you?

Christine: Yes, sure.

Martha: You opened it. I think everybody has something to say about it.

Christine: I'll start especially I'm going to actually wear my editor hat for a second and not even my reader hat because my 20 years experience in the industry publishing books and being behind the scenes, I can tell you that publishing is really obviously focused on who the audience is for books. Rightfully so. You got to know who the audience is. The problem then comes though, and that we've always seen audiences in a really literally whitewashed myopic and limited way.

We've seen audiences through the eyes of the tastemakers who've already always traditionally been the gatekeepers who are the conduits to this audience. You're thinking of certain type of readers and satisfying a certain type of readers. That lingers to some degree even as publishing is trying to take strides in broadening audiences and thinking about how diverse your readers are. It's still this idea of who is this book for and is this book for Black readers or is this book for white readers and never the two shall meet.

Jo and I were really conscious about that, about really making sure that our book was going to resonate with both audiences meaning it wasn't going to overexplain things for Black audiences which is sometimes a real fault line in publishing. Like don't convey your experience, explain it to me as a white reader so I understand it. We were really going to steer clear of that and have Riley and her family and her character development stand on its own and stand on its own in a way that defied

tropes and stereotypes that we so often see in fiction which is even the dynamic of the as you mentioned earlier [unintelligible 00:35:52]

That it's so often the nice white family that takes the wayward Black child under their wing. We wanted to stay away from those stereotypes and cliches and in fact invert them. We also wanted the book to appeal and to resonate with white audiences. We were really thinking about a broad readership and even publishing the book and then going on tour and talking to all these book clubs, Jo mentioned. We felt really heartened that we did succeed in that. That the book has been really embraced by Black readers and white readers but also really fascinated by the fact that the conversations are very different in those circles.

Sometimes we experience it together if we do events. Sometimes if I'm doing an all Black book club or Jo is doing an all white book club, we can see what people talk about "in closed doors" changes. That's also really been a fascinating part. I think our interracial collaborations are powerful from an audience standpoint in terms of the reach and how making readers think about why they pick up books. Is it speaking to me as a white person? Am I learning, is it mirroring or reflecting my experience in the world?

Those are all really important questions. Am I learning about history that I didn't know and should know? Am I seeing a story about my ancestors and people that are amplified? Those are all really important questions of storytelling and what we're delivering to audiences.

Martha: A long time ago I heard that, and it made a lot of sense to me at the time that Black women are the biggest part of the fiction book-buying audience. This is one of these things that's driven me mad. This idea that there's a white audience and a Black audience. It's not my observation, it's not what I've seen. Shaunna and Alyson, I want to come back to the book club question and the audience question but I think Shaunna and Alyson, you probably have a lot to say on this so I'm just going to listen.

Shaunna: I do. Maybe one thing I'll say, because I am the debut novelist on the panel and farthest away from the publishing industry, and in a way that's a luxury because I have a day job, I get a W-2 and I embarked upon this because I wanted it to be a legacy project and probably being a little bit naive to some of the business pressures of putting together a novel. There were times when Alyson and I really had to have in-depth conversations about ensuring that there was the appropriate amount of light in the book.

We certainly did not want to whitewash or sugarcoat history in any way but this is four ordinary people all of whom are marginalized going through one of the most cataclysmic times. There are going to be things that happen that are uncomfortable and really understanding and working with Alyson and working with our great editor to figure out how to balance that was something that was very new to me. Because I'm like, "This is what it is. It's the Civil War, sweetie. It's bad."

Then understanding that every audience is not ready for that. In fact, most audiences are not ready for that. You have to take them on a journey if you don't want them to close it on the second page and not take advantage of all of the history that you do

want to put in front of them in this wonderful story. For me, I think that was the biggest growth experience understanding that you can tell the story the way you want to, but you also have to be really mindful of the fact that it has to be told in a way that people can receive it and that means that you're Black and your white audiences and everybody in between are maybe not going to be similarly situated on that.

Martha: Were you getting that feedback from editors along the way or just something that you've figured out as a team?

Alyson: I think that with some of our early readers, before it was published, there was some fear that if we were to go very dark very quickly that we might alienate readers. What Shaunna said about us really wanting to illuminate history accurately was something that was really right from the beginning, the foundation of our collaboration. We were never going to write about the civil war and about slavery without showing what slavery was like. We would've felt that we were basically giving a bucket of dishwater to our publisher if we weren't going to show those dark passages.

We did also want to show light. I think what happened with us is that when we received the information that maybe some of the brutality that we needed to show in order to show this landscape of the civil war, did that have to come in page 20 or could we push it back to maybe page 40 until you were really into the character's mindset. We could compromise in that way but we were never going to compromise about the facts of history. It's interesting when I was listening to Christine and Joe talking about wanting to ensure that their book wasn't going to be a book that was only going to be read by Black readers or white readers, that they wanted it to be a universal read.

Shaunna and I definitely felt that as well. I think our feeling was that we wanted to open up history that was not taught in the classroom. Shaunna and I went down to Port Hudson and Louisiana where she could talk about that research, but about a battle that's never taught in history books or the burning of the Colored Orphan Asylum on 43rd and 5th Avenue in New York during the Civil War. This was never taught in history.

How do you find a way to educate the reader with it not seeming like you're shoving history down their throat, but that they're walking in the footsteps of the characters connected to them emotionally, seeing through their lens. Those were all things that Shaunna and I were talking about. We wanted you when you finished the last page to be like, "I had no sense of that. **[inaudible 00:42:12]** growing up in the classroom, and I learned something from this book, and I also fell in love with the characters.

Martha: Thank you. These are all really beautiful insights. It's really nice to open a window on some of this. Before we listen to Alyson and Shaunna, can you talk a little bit more about the audiences? I mean, Jo and Christine, you talked about going to white book clubs, Black book clubs, and different questions. I would love to probe that a little more.

Jo: Yes. We've been to a lot of clubs. We've done a lot of corporate talks about the book, and in fact, a lot of companies have been using the book for some of their DEI

programming. Which has been really interesting to see the conversations that come up, and we hear time and time again, people say, "Oh, it's easier to have these hard conversations about race and social justice when we have fiction as the launch point, rather than non-fiction, because you can talk about fiction in a different way. You can open up in a different way about your feelings about fiction often than you can about non-fiction and real life."

Going to a lot of these book clubs, we've learned that book clubs are still typically very segregated, wouldn't you say, Christine? Probably 90%, it's either we're going to an all-Black book club, or an all-white book club, or mostly. We get different kinds of questions, and we get different perspectives. It's very interesting, you would think in the white book club, they may necessarily relate to Jen more, a lot of the white book club members end up relating to Riley more, they seem to demonize Jen often a lot more than sometimes even the Black book club.

Martha: That's really interesting.

Jo: Yes. They're harder on her, often. Then we see a lot of the Black women in the book club--

Martha: Just to remind our readers that Jen is the wife of the police officer who shot the young Black man. [unintelligible 00:44:29]

Jo: Yes. I will also say that for us when we had some early reads too, it was often white readers that were much more nervous about the book coming out. Especially with our book, our timeline is, we started conceiving of this at the end of 2017, sold it in 2018, we're finished in spring of 2020. The book was completely written when George Floyd was murdered, and we had a lot of early white readers around that time, who were very on edge about-- they were like, "Oh, should you have a book in the world that is about a police shooting of a Black man?"

Maybe the police should be fully demonized in this, maybe your white character should have a complete conversion to be even more fully woke. Christine and I, from the very beginning, didn't want to create a fairy tale. We wanted to create, what does reality look like when you're dealing with race and you're dealing with social justice? I will say a lot of the white readers, they wanted the fairy tale more, I think, than the Black readers did. What do you think, Christine?

Christine: I agree. Yes. I think something that has come up a lot in a lot of book clubs, not even necessarily maybe in the full conversation, but on one-on-ones or we hear from readers, both Black and white about their relationships with-- their cross-cultural relationships which are still rare as we know. I mean, even that we have like two long friendships in this panel, as Black women, white women, and we know anecdotally, and we know statistically that that's really rare, and a lot of times people especially post 2020, or even post-2016.

I mean, the Trump era has ushered in a lot of friction, as we all know. We'll hear from readers who will say, "I could relate because I had a Black friend once and this and this happened." or, "I had a white friend once and she said this and this and it was over." Whether they were lifelong friends or new friends, or whether there was a big miscommunication, or a little misunderstanding, whatever it was, there was a lot of,

talk to us about that. People had really different takes on these situations, and so that was fascinating.

Just really emblematic about race in America. Everyone said it was so hard to talk about, everyone said that these flashpoints would come up in their relationship and they, like Jen and Riley had no idea how to navigate them. Some people were able to push through. Jo and I can even say we've experienced that and pushed through and some people have really lost these relationships. In a lot of cases, they were mourning them with us. That's just the power of fiction, to open up these more personal conversations, as Joe talked about, that wouldn't happen if you're reading some really great non-fiction, but it just doesn't elicit the same kind of intimate responses.

Martha: Yes. We definitely do want to come back to your working relationships with one another. Definitely want to ask Alyson and Shaunna to respond. There's another really difficult dichotomy in your book, which reflects now. I didn't quite realize this, but it reflects Alyson's background, but we have these two brothers who are on opposite sides of the war, which is also really painful. Before you read, I'd love to ask you reflect on some of your experiences with audiences.

Shaunna: This is not quite on point to your question, Martha. I hope you will indulge me but it's just something quick.

Martha: Oh no, that's your job.

Shaunna: Something that Christine said that I wanted to just talk about right away and that is, that before Alyson and I embarked on this project, and-- I've got friends look like the United Colors of Benetton because I've been raised in primarily white institutions. I cannot recall a single conversation we ever had squarely about race. I've been racking my brains it's like we spent the past three years essentially living side-by-side but I can't recall something that we ever had that was like on four points about race. When we first sat down, our first writing day was actually Juneteenth, which **[inaudible 00:49:04]** day.

I think that was the first day we made this commitment to each other, that we would be brutally honest and transparent that we had to be, given the subject matter. It just made such a difference in our relationship. That's not to suggest that it has always been easy, but a lot of times when we're speaking to audiences, and thus far, our book hasn't been around as long but primarily, there have been white audiences. It has been about that bravery, that needing to go a little bit further than is comfortable on both sides in order to even begin to meet halfway if you're going to bridge that divide.

Christine: Can I just jump in here too, because I think that's so interesting. We had the exact same experience. Shaunna, there's something that you said at the beginning, where it's like, you had these reservations about jumping into this project, and what it would entail on all different kinds of levels. I think for Jo and I, I'll just speak for myself, it was a little bit the opposite. I feel like I went in a little bit naïve about it. I'm like, "Oh yes, we're going to write a book together. We're going to talk about race all the time and it's going to be fine."

I think I went into our collaboration as a Black woman, just much more versed in talking about race. I've been talking about race my whole life so I didn't even think that it would be something that was a barrier but I mean now, especially talking about this book from years after it's published, it is such a barrier for people. We ran into that roadblock that I ran-- it hit the limits of my naivete in terms of, "Oh, wait," and we had to have this similar kind of come to Jesus conversation.

Whereas, if we can't really, as you described it Shaunna, be brutally honest, brutally open and vulnerable, and keep going up to the edge, we were never going to be able to do this as collaborators but we were also never going to be able to be close friends. There was always going to be a barrier there and so we had to push through that on two levels, really.

Alyson: One of the memories that stands out for me, was on that Juneteenth, that first day where Shaunna and I felt like we needed to meet in-person to look each other in the eyes and really decide if we were going to try and collaborate and write 40 pages together, see if we could sell it on proposal. Because Shaunna has a day job and I didn't want to write a full-- Christine, I didn't want her writing a full manuscript and then not having it sell.

Christine: Amen.

[laughter]

All about the proposal.

Alyson: Yes, I'm like, "Let's get this all before I waste your time." It was June 2020, and we decided to meet in the park, Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library. Right away we were trying to say why this book was going to be important to us. If we were going to embark on this tentative collaboration to see if we could make something beautiful in a very fragile time in the world. We wanted to put our hearts in it, but also be completely honest about what our intention was in creating something that we hoped would be, like we said, like a legacy project, that when we weren't here, this book was going to be something to be proud of. I was trying to say to Shaunna that one of the reasons why this book had returned to me was because of feeling so completely devastated about what happened with George Floyd, and just recognizing all the racial injustice that has always been in America since its inception. I said to Shaunna, really wanting to say something that was coming from my heart.

I was always raised to be colorblind. Shaunna looked at me and she said, "If you don't see my color, I can't write this book with you." It was at that moment that I realized that a word that my family used all the time, that to them meant that they were anti-racist, that they saw the world not by the color of your skin, but who you are as a person and who your soul was. Shaunna heard that word very differently than I did. To me, that was a turning point in our relationship where we realized that we needed to be able to say anything to each other, and that person had to hear it, and they had to learn from it.

I want to say it was a beautiful moment because it was something where I as someone who has written books my whole life and thought I had a great command of

the English language, realized two people can hear a word very differently from their experience, from their backgrounds, from whatever, but you have to learn and you have to hear it the way they hear it and to embrace that. That became this touchstone for us in this relationship. Shaunna, there were different things that we each heard differently.

Shaunna: Absolutely. Something that comes to mind for me is the way we would do our process is we did not have a robust outline at the beginning. We weren't quite flying [crosstalk] **[unintelligible 00:54:15]** We knew what our characters-- what was important to them, and loosely where they would go. We would do this brainstorming. I have a writing caftan, I would put on my writing caftan, and we'd talk on Sunday nights for hours.

Martha: I want one of those.

Shaunna: I'll send you one, Martha. [laughs]

Christine: It sounds like my cream bathrobe, Jo. It sounds very similar. I have a writing bathrobe.

Shaunna: We were talking about the only scene in the novel where you see the two brothers, the two Jewish brothers that ultimately become estranged, talking about their opposing views on slavery. We set it against the backdrop of Passover because we thought it would be poignant for the Jewish people to be retelling the story of their exodus from slavery while grappling with the issue of American slavery.

Alyson was always lovely. She never made me feel like the junior writing partner. She said, "Well, how would you see the scene unfolding?" Giving me plenty of time and space to think about it. I launched into this idea where the older brother is going to be talking about the economics and wanting to protect his business, and the Mercantile depot is growing. Alyson, very firmly but gently, she said, "I'm uncomfortable with that."

It's like a Jewish woman perpetuating a stereotype that Jewish people will subvert their values for economic gain. Of course, that's not what I meant, but as a Black woman and in my day job in DE&I, I'm always like, "It doesn't matter your intent. It's about the impact." That was what she was telling me. It doesn't matter what your intent was, the impact is going to perpetuate a stereotype I don't want to. I had to hear that and I had to say, "Okay, well, let's find another way in." Even though I am a new novelist, I think it makes me a better novelist, because you can't just take the lazy route.

You just can't say, "Oh, well, people are going to respond to this because it's familiar to them." You actually have to take a step back and I think be responsible with your words and with your language and the characters that you're creating. Not to mean that they all need to be angels, but you need to understand what you put out in the world and its impact before you do it.

Martha: I think that's the beauty of reading fiction. Listening to the thought that you writers have all put into something. I think it's also incumbent on the reader, we readers, to diversify as much as possible our reading life because we need to take

all of this in. As everyone is talking about, we still live in a very, very segregated society. I don't want to get too much time to pass before we hear from *The Thread Collectors* team. Please set it up for us and tell us what you're reading. Thank you.

Alyson: Well, we decided we were going to read a passage. As Shaunna mentioned, we have four characters in our book. We have William, the very talented flutist, Jacob Kling, who is also a musician, and then the two women, Stella and Lily. We actually decided we were going to read a passage that explains where William, our talented Black musician, where his musicality came from and his roots. One of the things that Shaunna dreamed of and wanted to put in the book right from the beginning was that William was going to come from one of the Gullah Geechee islands, which I right away was like, "I've never heard of the Gullah Geechee islands."

Shaunna explained to me that there are these beautiful sea islands that are off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. During the time of the slave trade, Black people from parts of Africa who had really rich traditions of rice cultivation and harvesting, indigo harvesting, these men and women were brought to American shores to the Gullah Geechee islands where their knowledge was exploited, obviously for economic gain. The visual of the indigo and the beauty of the leaves was something that we really wanted to juxtapose with the brutality of slavery. This passage has to do with William's mother and where he gets his music from. I'll begin and Shaunna will end.

Martha: Thank you.

Alyson: Survival was a skill William had learned from his mother, from watching her quiet actions, not her words. Ever since William was a young boy, older folks on the plantation whispered that William had inherited his musical gift from his mother, Tilly. Her voice was her instrument. She sang in the indigo fields whenever she collected the blue-green leaves, she sang while she wove the seagrass baskets they used for the harvest. She sang low, murmuring almost to herself when the overseer walked behind her with his cane raised high, and as loud as she could on Sundays when she joined her fellow slaves in desperate prayers for deliverance.

Tilly was a tiny thing, but her voice was far stronger than others who eclipsed her in size. It came from a place deep within her, a bottomless well of grief and hope in equal parts. She sang to keep her body and mind from breaking, the spirituals lifting her up when she wanted to fall down, when the basket on her head became too heavy, or when her fingertips bled from ripping the indigo leaves from their sturdy, verdant stalks.

She loved the tambourine too for the rhythm it sounded, for the ancestral call it ignited in her bones. It was the ringing of a chime that transported her to a place where she was momentarily free. Many were enamored by her natural musicality, but William's father, Isaiah, was the first to interest Tilly enough to break her cadence. "You got a lovely singing voice," he complimented her one afternoon as he took her basket of green leaves from her. Shaded by a thatched roof, Isaiah toiled over the processing vats where they converted the indigo plants into the coveted dye.

She smiled, her unusual slate gray eyes softening for a moment. Isaiah emptied her bounty into the water soaking barrel. The bottle green blades floated on the surface before sinking. Hours later, he would remove the wilted leaves and transfer them into another vat where he would beat them with a wooden paddle until the water transformed from green to blue. "Heard you singing last week, and I still got your voice inside my head," he whispered. She didn't answer him back in words, but began humming something soft as she took her leave

Shaunna: The spring William was born, an onslaught of devastating floods afflicted Sapelo Island destroying the flowering season of the rice and indigo. Master Righter grew increasingly unpredictable, his rages became more frequent. The more his anger flared at his overseer and his own debts, the more the beatings at the plantation escalated. Isaiah, robbed of enjoying any new moment as a new father, was the frequent target of ire and arbitrary punishments. Fearing for his job as the plantation failed, the overseer thought to bend Isaiah, a natural leader, to his will to make the other slaves fall in line.

All the while, Tilly sang even louder. She sang when she was forced to try to salvage what she could of the crop. Working all morning and into the night, under a full moon, with William swaddled on her back. "Talk'um dey gone'way frum here. Mek fuh freedom," Isaiah confided one night when they lay together on their straw pallet. "We need to run," he whispered. Even within the relative safety of their squalid cabin, he barely vocalized the dangerous idea of escaping to the north. Even then, adding another layer of secrecy, he uttered them in the Gullah language, created by the slaves from a mixture of West African, English, and Creole.

He laid his lips right against her ear, so she more felt than heard the words. Tilly knew there was no way to flee with a child, and no way she could ever leave her son behind. She pulled William to her breast. "Heard that debts are so bad, they may have to sell some of us. I know they'd sell me. Then you and Willie lost to me forever." Tilly gently sighed in response. She recognized things were getting much worse for Isaiah. His natural pride, the quality that she loved most in him, was what made him a target of the master and overseer's unbridled wrath. "Way I figure, we can either die here or out there, but either way, we'd be free from this."

Isaiah ventured against her silence. He knew that it would be a struggle to convince her. She didn't answer him. Her breath stopped as she clutched her infant even tighter to her side. Isaiah listened to her quiet inhalations and knew she wouldn't ever go. "We wouldn't get far with him." Her finger laced around William's and she brought it to her mouth. There was nothing normal about mothering when you were a slave. She had heard of women who smothered their babes when they decided to flee, forced to extinguish their lives rather than risking their child's fate being dictated by a white man.

"I heard there's a woman in Savannah who can help us get North." Tilly mutely shook her head. The tabby shack was constructed from mud walls made from shale and oyster shells. The damp and dark enveloped them. The minutes that passed felt excruciatingly long. She could not go with him. "Sunday at dusk," she whispered, "When we're all still in the praise house, I'll sing louder than I ever have. They won't hear you run."

Martha: Oh, such a painful passage. It's beautiful. Thank you very much. I want to ask this team, *The Thread Collectors* team, what is next for you? Particularly Shaunna, I want to know if you've been bitten by the writing bug. I know you have a full-time job, but of course [crosstalk]

Shaunna: I have been so bitten by the writing bug. Who couldn't want to be a hyphenate like Rihanna or something. I absolutely know that I will write on my own and I have an idea also inspired by some of my family background. Jo, you talked about not wanting to write a fairytale. We didn't want to write a fairytale either, so our book does not end at the end of the Civil War, as if now the north is one and everything is fine. It ends with some hope and some optimism, but also some uncertainty is what comes next.

Alyson and I have certainly spoken about this idea of bringing our characters forward into reconstruction, because it is not a time that we're taught much about at all in school in terms of the hope that happened, but also the broken promises, and maybe even bringing these families forward and their descendants into the 1920s and also the 1960s where we know that there were a lot of Jewish people who were allies to Black people during the civil rights movement. We've got big dreams, but Alyson, as my publishing Sherpa always reminds me, "You got to sell the first book and make people fall in love with it before you start dreaming of the second one."

Martha: I want to ask this question because several of you mentioned a proposal. I am not familiar with proposals for fiction. Were these books sold on proposal?

Christine: I'll just jump in as the editor again. [crosstalk]

Martha: Thank you. We're salivating here.

Christine: I know. I know. I want to be realistic about this for all the writers in the room. It's not very common to sell a novel on proposal at all. It's much more common for non-fiction, but for fiction, most editors want to see the whole thing because a lot of people can write a great first 50 pages or great ending, you want to make sure that the story holds up all the way through. There are some exceptions for writers who have written a lot of books, because then you have earned the right to say, "I can do this here." For your second, third, fourth book down the line, that is a more common way to sell a book, but certainly not very common for a debut.

Martha: I just had to ask that.

Christine: I'm glad you did. [unintelligible 01:06:27] my book.

Martha: We're coming up on the opportunity to have questions from our audience. Audience members, if you do have questions, please type them into the Q&A at the bottom of your screen. One of them that's already up there is something I want to ask Jo and Christine, because Christine was Jo's editor. I want to ask you particularly about that relationship and how it's changed over time. There's a person online who said, "Did anything about being on the other side of the editorial process surprise you, Christine?" It's part of this all the same question, I guess.

Christine: I'll start with saying, yes. The biggest thing that surprised me is that it's really hard to write a book. That should not have come as such a surprise to me, and yet after publishing book after book after book after book, I'm like, "Yes, go off and write your books." I would just drop people a 13-page editorial letter on a Friday at 5:00 and be like, "Have at it. Good luck." Now being on the receiving end of feedback or editorial letter, I'm like, "Oh my God, what is going to happen? How are we going to do this?" I am a lot more empathetic and understanding and compassionate about both the discipline involved in writing a book and the emotional rollercoaster that's involved in writing a book.

It's just until you're on the other side you don't really know what that's like at all. It's just a very specific thing to be a writer, and until you really do it, and I'm sure Shaunna can relate to this too, until you do it, it's like being a mother, which I also am not and have no idea how to do that, but we cross over a threshold and you're on the other side and you just have no idea what's waiting for you on the other side until you actually do it, no matter how much people tell you about it. That was actually really surprising to me.

Martha: Interesting.

Alyson: I think also having published, this is my eighth, having never done a collaboration, I think having a friend that when you get feedback from your editor or something happens or you're having a block, it's not just you in front of the computer anymore, you have someone to talk about it with. Even being on tour, it's so much better. It definitely makes it less lonely and you pull each other out of the ditch. If you're upset about something, the other one pulls you up and tells you to put a smile on your face or covers you when you're lagging if you're doing a talk. The collaboration is a very unique experience. It's very different than writing by yourself.

Martha: Interesting. There's a question here for all the authors, could you describe some of the creative conflicts that arose during your collaboration and how you resolved them? Anybody want to start with that?

Jo: Yes. I have a story that's similar to the story you were telling, and I could see Christine was about to jump in and tell that too, when you were talking about the word colorblind. When we first started sketching out our outline and our characters, one of the things that I said to Christine was, "I feel like our Black character, our character of Riley is just too perfect." She was almost annoyingly perfect on the page. I just really like writing messed up, flawed women and flawed characters, and also human characters, because no characters are perfect.

I started brainstorming out loud with Christine. I'm like, "What could we do? What does she have? What baggage does she have? Do we want to give her a drinking problem? Her parents have a drinking problem. Is she the child of divorce? Is she having an affair?" These were all tropes that I had put on characters in the past, and Christine was like, "[unintelligible 01:10:37] Stop right there. I don't want to put any of these on Riley. These are stereotypes that are often put on Black women in stories and in books." I pushed back on that. My argument was like, "No, we did this to our white character. We did this to Charlotte Walsh in the book that we created together."

Charlotte had alcoholic drug addict parents. She had a teenage pregnancy. Those things. Christine was like, "No, it is different when you're dealing with a Black character." That was our really first big reckoning. Our only reckoning, because we got through it. We got over the hump after that. I said, "No, it's not." She's like, "Yes, it is." That was really the big creative thing that we had to get past and we had to work through. That was our moment where we had to say, "We have to be able to talk about anything." Christine's like, "We can't be friends, we can't be co-writers unless we can do this."

From my part, I was afraid, and we hear this from a lot of white readers too, I was afraid of saying the wrong thing. I was afraid of stepping on Christine's toes. I was afraid of insulting her somehow. I was terrified of having a lot of these conversations. We couldn't be in that place and create this book together. We really had to get past it, and we say that very openly when we're giving talks to readers. We hear it from a lot of white readers who are like, "I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing." This book has actually helped me in a lot of ways, figure out how to be a little bit more comfortable with at least saying something.

Martha: What would your response be, Alyson and Shaunna, about creative conflicts that you encountered and how you dealt with them?

Alyson: I'm thinking about the note you said about the women of Rampart Street and their size.[laughs]

Shaunna: We did not have a lot of hair pulling, which I'm not suggesting that you guys did, but it feels like everybody [unintelligible 01:12:48] like, "Didn't you pull each other's hair?" After we had that seminal discussion, Juneteenth, and moved forward, it was almost like something had been released, and then we could just move forward and we're like, "Okay." There were definitely times when we would talk about different words and how it was landing. You may even see that, in our book, both Black and white are capitalized, which was something that we decided on very early, because I was sick of just reading about, "Now you have all these people, but now you have the Black girl just comes off the scene." I'm like, "Okay, if we're going to describe people's race, then we're going to describe everyone's race, and we're going to really highlight it."

It wasn't so much conflict, but it was this constant, "Let's talk about absolutely everything." It was almost, and I don't mean it in a way of deference, because I don't know that you could have a good collaboration if you were completely deferential to your partner. If someone was really passionate about something or if someone felt very strongly about something, then the other one said, "Okay. I hear you. I'm there to back you up on that," I guess I would say. It really felt more like fighting side-by-side as opposed to necessarily having conflict with each other. [crosstalk] What Alyson was saying, she does have this tendency to describe all women as, you can't tell because we're sitting down, as very tall and lean, which she is and I'm not. I am short and curvy. At one point when we're describing the women of Rampart Street, I did leave a snarky note, and I was like, "Can we get some curves?" [unintelligible 01:14:29] sunflower women. She was like, "I never noticed." Even her daughter was like, "You do describe all women as tall and lean."

Martha: To me, it's really interesting that you had such a long friendship, because I'm not sure I could collaborate with a friend. That comes, I think, with its own issues, because you've been relating to each other in a friend way and not a work way.

Alyson: At the same time, Martha, I think I've never asked another friend to write a book with me. I have another collaboration coming out in the spring, but it's with two authors who have several books under their belt. Because Shaunna and I, our friendship was always about books. From the minute we met in Las Vegas, it was like, "What are you reading now? Can you come to my book club?" If I was sick, a book would come in the mail from Shaunna. As I mentioned, she was that litmus test that if I had an idea, she was going to tell me if it was a bad idea, like, "That sounds a little boring." It was always about books.

Also, I think when you're really good friends with someone, you have a sense of energy between the two of you, you know someone who inspires you, who ignites thought. Shaunna's someone-- you spend 20 minutes with her and you feel like your IQ raises like 20 points, because she has you pulling about, "Did you see this documentary? Did you read this book? What about this?" She's always building and she's so creative. For me, it just felt really natural to think that we could build something beautiful.

I can't say that about any other one of my friends. I would've been like, "Hey, do you want to write a book with me?" Also, even though we might not have talked about race prior to writing this book, we were always honest about each other. We always shared vulnerabilities or things about our family. Certainly, now that we're on tour together and we spend so much time, what we're realizing is that our mothers were separated at birth. Literally they're the same people.

[laughter]

Alyson: Even I said something to her, "My mother doesn't let me have a key to her apartment in the city because she doesn't trust me." She was like, "Oh my God, my mother's the same." [laughs]

Shaunna: My mother allows me to cook in one pan when I'm in her house because she's got a seafood allergy and she's convinced that I'm going to kill her and that I'll forget. I'm well over the age that I would remember.

Martha: Well, I just want to say, we could just go off on a big tangent about mothers.

Shaunna: There's a whole mother thing here. [laughs]

Alyson: There are definitely similarities and there's definitely this honesty that we always had from the beginning.

Martha: I love that.

Christine: Well, that really resonated for me too, because I think that the idea of trust is so important. In the beginning, when Jo and I would have creative conflicts and the way we got out of them over time was this idea of a mutual belief in the project and that the other person was doing what's best for the book, not personal ego. It wasn't about like, "I want to win this paragraph to the degree that you can't

even win a paragraph." It was about the book and then trusting-- you learn the other person's skills, and what you lack, they are stronger in, and vice versa. Then you trust that, then you trust what they're doing. That helps you be differential to the back and forth, and that difference has to go both ways. When it does, as long as it's balanced, then it feels less threatening.

Martha: I love that. This is a question from Luann Williams in the audience. This has been a fascinating discussion of partnership and collaboration. Can you talk more about the outline? Did you use a platform for sending your work back and forth? What was it like to negotiate the outline?

Christine: [crosstalk] [laughs]. Oh, that's for us.

Jo: Well, we used Google Docs. We did send it back and forth. I don't really remember the outline process for *We Are Not Like Them*, but I know that we're doing it again for our third book together.

Martha: Can I just break this down to a really granular level? Is there one person who's assigned to start the outline and the other one comments?

Jo: No.

Christine: No, we do it-- In our beginning outline, it's very live, verbal, for lack of a better word. We're talking through ideas and then just jotting them in a Google Doc that we're both looking. A lot of it starts big picture like, "What's the tense, what's our location? What's our POV? What characters are we showcasing? What about these characters? Where do they meet?" The big picture stuff. Then we'll start to keep breaking it down. Then Chapter 1, what happens? Chapter 2, what happens? Chapter 3, what happens? Then we just go beat by beat from there and then it gets more and more granular as we go.

Alyson: We did not work with an outline. I've never worked on an outline. This is Christine's nightmare person [unintelligible 01:19:18] [laughs]

Christine: My mind is truly blown.

Alyson: No. I wanted to be a painter before wanting to be a writer. For me, it's like you start doing a gesture drawing and then you build brushstroke after brushstroke until the chapter is formed into a painting. Shaunna and I would have brainstorming sessions every Sunday night where we would basically try and create maybe 20 pages of content of what we-- slowly building the story. From page 1 to page 20, what's going to happen? I would take really copious notes as we brainstorm verbally. Then I would, on the Google Doc, do what I like to describe as almost this wire armature that the scene had shape and form. I'd put a thin layer of clay on that, but there was still several more that needed to be added.

I'd say, "The Google Doc is up," and then Shaunna would go in and she would put her layer of clay and start embroidering and then she'd tell me she was finished. Then I would go back and we'd probably go back and forth on those 20 pages three or four times until it looked exactly the way we both wanted it to look, how it heard in our ear, the way we wanted it to. Then we'd move on to the next 20 pages. By the

time we got to the end of the book, the book was a very polished stone. We finished our editorial comments in two days. The book was done and it went. It was slow, very slow, and just revising, revising. Then when it was good, we'd move on.

Christine: How long did it take you from start to finish, I'm just curious, to write the book?

Alyson: We sold it in December 2020, because we met in June. We did 40 pages for the proposal and--

Shaunna: That was budding up on a wedding deadline [unintelligible 01:21:05]

Alyson: Our deadline was August, but we finished in May, so we did it in five months, which is crazy.

Shaunna: She had never written that fast, but I am a taskmaster, and as a former lawyer, used to having to get through dense things and writing a lot really quickly. I'd be like, "Come on." We call each other [crosstalk]

Alyson: I said to her, "I normally write a book. It takes me two years to write a book." That's my normal thing.

Shaunna: [unintelligible 01:21:29] I'm Michael, we'd be like, "Come on sunny, we can do it. Come on, we got it."

Alyson: We were working seven days a week nonstop. It was very different than my normal process, but we did it quickly, but-- well, slowly in the sense that we didn't have an outline. We just moved slowly in our way to the end.

Martha: There's actually a follow-up question to this from Shane Inman, for either pair, did you find it a struggle at any point to maintain a consistent narrative voice between the two of you? Were there points at which divergent tendencies regarding language became an issue you needed to wrestle with.

Christine: Not us. Tell me if you disagree, Jo, but I think because when we did talk so much about who the characters were going to be, and I think, similar to Alyson and Shaunna's process, and they mentioned earlier too, wanting to have a coherent narrative voice, we were really cognizant of that too, that's why we really wanted to both write both parts. It would've felt disjointed and jarring if I just wrote one character and Jo wrote another character, and so that was really important to us.

All five of us would have different writing styles, any writer is just going to have a different approach on the page. It was about both being in it enough so that those merged. Once we started writing, we found the characters' voices, which were different from our own. Riley does have a voice and Jen does have a voice, but ours was subsumed to theirs. They just took on a voice of their own.

Martha: It's partly your ear, right?

Christine: Yes. I feel like it was-- Once we found it, and it came early on, there wasn't a lot of conflict around that.

Martha: Marsha Bradley says, "What wonderful people you are. So much creativity and great partnership. Thank you for sharing." Then somebody is asking, "Your writing relationships appear to have developed organically. Do you have any suggestions on how to find a co-author of a different race or ethnicity for those of us who may have a story to tell that is not exactly our story to tell?" I actually want to hijack this question a little.

Christine: Please.

Martha: I would love to collaborate on my book, but worried about, I don't want to come off as inappropriate. The first thing I want to offer to this questioner is a really interesting essay by Zadie Smith, who is a British author that's written a lot. I don't remember the name of the essay, but it's pretty easy to Google and it covers her opinions about appropriation. I was going to actually ask you that. I think by appropriation we mean writing in the voice of another character that you may not-- I don't know how to define this. Are you permitted to write in the voice of another character who's different from yourself? I'm going to just jump in a little bit of moderator's prerogative. I think we wouldn't have fiction if we didn't do that. Let me just start there. I think we all want to write about people who are different from ourselves. I think that it's really important to write with respect and to do your homework, homework is really important, but I'd love for all of you to comment on that, because that question comes up a lot right now.

Christine: Well, that's why we were so eager for you to take it, Martha.

[laughter]

Martha: Well, I can keep going. I'm happy to keep going because this is something that comes up a lot, and especially about the current books that I'm writing. I don't know that you need to collaborate. Collaboration is wonderful and this is a beautiful set of relationships, so I love that, but I think most of us are not collaborating. I think we have to collaborate mentally. I'm a white person, I think 20-ish, 30-ish years ago, probably earlier, I just made a commitment that for every book I read by a white person, I would read a book by a woman of color, and my entire universe changed.

It's really easy to do. I don't ever think about it anymore, but at one time I felt I do believe in intentionality, especially if you're white and live in a society with a lot of white norms and structures. I think respect is really important. I think some of it is so basic that we don't remember that we're all humans and every character who's worth being on the page has to have a lot of humanity and be multifaceted. I also support the idea of sensitivity readers. I don't know what you folks think about that. I'm a straight, cis, white woman. I'm working on a book with two gay characters and a major character is Black, and I've had already one set of sensitivity readings and I'm sure I'm going to do it again. Wow, Christine, I did it.

[laughter]

Martha: That's my two minutes, but I'd love to hear from you guys.

Christine: I will say though, just a short answer to that and from a publishing standpoint, I don't think it works to go, "I'm going to go find somebody who's different

than me to write a book together," or, "I want to write this book, but let me find a gay person because I want a gay character. I'm going to send out a call." That's just, one, really cynical, and two, going to come across on the page, and is bad behind the scenes. I'd be wary of that idea. I'd favor just taking ownership, as you said, Martha, of doing the research and writing the character that you want to write as opposed to trying to find a way in that feels a little too problematic.

Martha: Other folks on the panel.

Jo: I love the story of how Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Finney Boylan got together to write *Mad Honey*, which deals with very pressing trans issues. Jenn Boylan just had a dream one night that she wrote a book with Jodi Picoult. They didn't know each other at all, and she just tweeted, she's like, "I had a dream last night that I collaborated on a book with Jodi Picoult." Jodi wrote back, she's like, "What's the idea?" Jen DM'd her and was like **[unintelligible 01:28:22]** and Jodi is like, "Let's do it."

Like Christine said, I don't think you should go out, setting out saying like, "I am going to find myself this collaborator who is very different from me," in the same way that you really shouldn't go out and be like, "I am going to get myself some new Black friends for my all-white book club." I do think that there are serendipitous things that happen. I'm not a woo-woo person per se, I'm not a religious or spiritual person, but I do believe that books happen when they're supposed to happen.

If you put out into the universe that this is a book that you want to write, or even just talk to yourself about it and just start getting that book together, I do think that the magic happens around the creation of books, and so I firmly believe that if that book is meant to be in the world, the collaborator will come to you.

Martha: I've heard that so many times, when a book is meant-- when the stars align, or the universe provides, or whatever.

Christine: As Alyson described it, the wind at your back, which was so beautiful.

Alyson: It's definitely true because I was so inspired after that lunch with Shaunna where she freely added this whole other layer with the embroidered maps and opening it up to a love story. I was just seeing it from the perspective of the two men from different backgrounds and faiths, but I really left and I wrote a different book. I always have three ideas, but the wind pointed me in a different direction, but then it repositioned me in 2020. Also, the memory of having that lunch with Shaunna came back to me. I never forgot it, and I had an instinctual sense that the book would be so much better if we collaborated and brought our two perspectives.

I just finished a book that is about a Vietnamese refugee child who comes over to the United States in 1979 and his life colliding with a Vietnam veteran. I definitely worked with two sensitivity readers. The book is inspired by a Vietnamese woman who was a boat child who came over here in 1979. She had already entrusted her story with me, but I was very, very diligent of making sure, as you phrased it, Martha, to do my homework. I went to Vietnam in January 30th to February 10th in 2020, right before COVID started. It was something I was working on while I was working on my book with Shaunna.

I've had two experiences, writing from a different perspective of someone who-- I'm not Vietnamese, but I enjoyed both experiences. Writing in a collaboration and learning from another person's cultural perspective that I did with Shaunna, but also then doing the homework my own solitary way doing this other book.

Martha: I want to thank all four of you so much. This has been such an interesting conversation. For those of you who are listening, this is taped. I guess, for all of you, you can share it. It will be on the PEN/Faulkner website. Thank you to Christine Pride, Jo Piazza, Shaunna Edwards, and Alyson Richman. It's been a pleasure. Caroline Schreiber from PEN/Faulkner is going to come on for just a minute before we close you out. It's been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much.

Caroline Schreiber: Thanks, Martha. I just want to echo that thanks to our writers for sharing all of your stories with us this evening and bringing us all along on this really lovely conversation. I hope you all have enjoyed it. Like Martha said, my name is Caroline Schreiber and I'm PEN/Faulkner's Director of Development. The first thing I want to do is to thank all of you at home for joining us tonight. As you know, PEN/Faulkner is a nonprofit, so your ticket purchase makes events like this one possible for us. If you're able, we hope you'll consider making an extra contribution to help us grow our education, literary, and awards programs, and to continue reaching thousands of readers, writers, and students every year. Thank you so much.

I'm also here to invite you to several upcoming events. First up, our literature on-screen event is coming up on April 10th. That conversation will focus on Louis Bayard's novel, *The Pale Blue Eye*, which was adapted into a Netflix film earlier this year. Both Louis and director, Scott Cooper, will join us for that conversation, which is going to be held in-person. Yes, in person, in DC. [laughs]

This is always a really popular event for us, so mark your calendars, get your tickets early, and you can find more information about that one at the link that Elena is putting in the chat. Next up, on May 11th, we are celebrating our 43rd annual PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. That ceremony will also be held in-person in DC at the newly renovated MLK Library.

I hope you've seen our finalists list online. It includes five incredible works of fiction that I know I'm working my way through right now, and I bet many of you are as well.

The ceremony will feature our award winner, our finalists, our judges, and this year's PEN/Faulkner literary champion, NPR's Terry Gross. It's going to be a really fantastic evening, and we hope you can join us. Thank you again to all of our writers and to you, Martha, for moderating. We hope to see you all again very soon. Good night.

Martha: [unintelligible 01:34:03]

Christine: Good night.

[01:34:06] [END OF AUDIO]