

**Gwydion Suilebhan:** Good evening. I am Gwydion Suilebhan, PEN/Faulkner's executive director, and I'm so grateful we all get to be together tonight even virtually. We are living through such difficult times, and I don't know about you, but one of my greatest comforts is the enrichment, and the deftness, and the nuance, and the power of fiction, which is what brings us together tonight. Thank you so much for being here. 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.

We believe that our 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, family, community, intersecting identities, and survival. First, we have Angie Cruz, the author of the novels *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water*, *Soledad*, *Let It Rain Coffee*, and *Dominicana*, as well as the founder and editor-in-chief of *Aster(ix)*, a literary and arts journal. We have Jonathan Escoffery, the author of *If I Survive You*, his first book, which was one of our most recent PEN/Faulkner Award finalists, and which has also been shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

We have Sarah Thankam Mathews, the author of *All This Could Be Different*, which is also her first novel. Sarah is the recipient of fellowships from the Asian American Writers' Workshop and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She grew up in Oman and India, immigrating to the United States at 17. Finally, to my absolute joy, our moderator tonight is PEN/Faulkner's own Jung Yun, a member of our board of directors, as well as an accomplished author whose novel, *O Beautiful*, which I absolutely loved, was a *New York Times* editor's pick and one of the *San Francisco Chronicle's* best books of 2021. With that, welcome, and thank you, Jung.

**Jung Yun:** Thank you so much, Gwydion. A special thanks to Sarah Silberman, director of awards and literary programs, Sherri Hammerman, marketing coordinator, and everyone at PEN/Faulkner for making this event possible. I'm so excited to be here with all of you this evening and to have an opportunity to talk to our three guest authors. I actually have more questions than we have time, so I'm just going to jump right in and ask each of our authors to turn on their mics and their cameras, and just give them a moment to do that. Hi, Sarah.

**Sarah Thankam:** Hello.

**Jung Yun:** Hey, Jonathan.

**Jonathan Escoffery:** Hi.

**Jung Yun:** There's Angie. Hi, everybody. Thank you, and welcome. I'm so excited. I recognize that not everybody in the audience today has read all of your books yet, although I hope they certainly will in the near future. To get us started, could each of you just tell us a bit about the person who anchors your book and how you came to

discover this character and decided that you wanted to write a whole world about them? Let's start with Angie first.

**Angie Cruz:** You're asking me, Jung, right?

**Jung Yun:** Yes, I am, Angie.

**Angie:** I'm so sorry--

**Jung Yun:** It's okay.

**Angie:** My internet is unstable, and it's because I'm right now right next to a hospital, and there's interference. I'm sorry, but I will try my best. Your question was, how did I come to write this book?

**Jung Yun:** Tell us a little bit about Cara Romero, how you came to discover her and decide that you wanted to build this book around her.

**Angie:** When I started working on this book, it was 2017, and I was in a moment in my life, kind of -- I was full of despair. Trump was president, it was 2017. I was on a subway platform, and I was thinking that maybe I should find something I could do that would be more useful for society, like become an immigration lawyer, go work on the border, do translation work. I was having a very difficult time selling my book, *Dominicana*. It had been circulating for four years, and I was thinking of switching careers. I think what's so interesting about writing, like -- books saved my life.

We're all in this thinking about what could books do in this moment that is so fraught, and for me as a young person, when I was very angry and I didn't know what to do in the world, I started to read. Books were the thing that helped me find language and become more functional in the world instead of just become inert. At that moment, I also was feeling very scared. Suddenly, when I was thinking of quitting and starting over, like quitting writing and starting over, Cara Romero's voice came to me, like literally. It was like a deep resource that I must have, a storytelling resource. Cara Romero came to me and she said, "My name is Cara Romero. I came to this country because my husband wanted to kill me. Don't look so shocked, you are the one who's asking me about myself."

Immediately, I saw this person in my head, her voice came in so loud, and I said, "Okay, maybe [unintelligible 00:08:02] me again," because I had been trying to get published for [inaudible 00:08:06]. I go listen to her on this train ride, I had 45 minutes, and I wrote everything she said on my phone. Writing almost as if I was having conversations with books, but also like my [inaudible 00:08:23] my writing comes from my grandmother and my *tías* who used to tell stories in the kitchen, and I decided, "Okay, I'm going to have Cara Romero -- I'm going to [unintelligible 00:08:33] Cara Romero every time I'm on a train, a plane, or a bus. Yes, I will move on from writing for the world, but I will write this book for myself." That's how she came to me.

**Jung Yun:** Fantastic. That's a beautiful segue. I would love to hear the excerpt. Each of our authors has been asked to choose a quick two-minute excerpt to read from their book so you can hear it in their own voice. Angie, would you read yours?

**Angie:** Sure.

**Jung Yun:** Great.

**Angie:** Yes.

"I've never done something like this before. I didn't [inaudible 00:09:17] going to have [inaudible 00:09:20] my life. La Profesora said that you'll help me. You're Dominicana, no? She said if you know me you could, because I need a job. The factory closed in 2007 right before Christmas. Can you believe that? Almost two years, I don't work. In reality, El Obama has been very generous. After the factory closed, I received 53 checks. Then El Obama gave me 13 checks, then 20 more. Did he have a choice? No. There are no jobs. My factory left to Costa Rica. You know they're never coming back."

**Jung Yun:** Thank you so much.

**Angie:** We'll skip me.

**Jung Yun:** Thank you, Angie. We're having a couple of technical difficulties, but we'll try to get that sorted out as we go along. Sarah, let's move on to you and Sneha, who I absolutely love and feel so much in common with in many cases. Tell us a little bit about her, how you discovered her.

**Sarah:** Yes, thank you. It's so good to be here with all of you. Hi, to everyone who joined, who's tuning in. Sneha is the protagonist of my novel, *All This Could Be Different*. At the opening of the book, she is a 22-year-old recent college graduate who has moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a city where she knows nobody, and proceeds really over the course of most of the novel to reckon with in the course of a year -- Her first job, which is a grueling corporate flunkey, her first love, this beautiful enigmatic ballet dancer, and her first real friends.

Sneha was sort of intentionally something between -- I wouldn't say an anti-hero, but less than flattering everyman. She's very specific. She has her own very specific personal history. She's Indian-American or an Indian immigrant who does not necessarily look like the sort of cricket and Bollywood-like representation of what it means to be Indian-American. She comes from a very specific place and a specific culture in India. She is quite gay, and really throughout the book in deep conflict with what it means for her to be queer or sapphic, and to have to be coming from this very conservative origin point. In many ways, you're watching this young person who is at once struggling under all the indignities of racial capitalism, who is slowly coming towards a certain kind of politicization, mostly due to her good friends, and is looking in so many ways for a home and her people. That's Sneha. Would you like me to briefly read?

**Jung Yun:** Please.

**Sarah:** *All This Could Be Different:*

"I would like to tell a story of a different time. I was 22, a teak switch of a girl. I had finished college, there were not many jobs. The economy had punctured like a tire. Obama had won a second term. He said, "Jobs, healthcare, national healing." He

said, "Trayvon Martin could have been my son." I was moved by this, thought that sort of imaginative exercise, [unintelligible 00:13:01]. I would listen to the speeches on NPR as I dressed for work. I had found a job. This set me apart from my college friends. I was a consultant or going to be this, despite my RD degree, a consultant in training three toddlers hiding in a suit.

I did not consider myself a sellout. What I felt was that I'd been saved from drowning. My classmates without jobs had moved in with their parents, were working unpaid internships with noble nonprofits. I wished them well. My parents were not with me, had left me to make my way in the new country. I was glad they did not for now need me to send them money -- they had before. My boss had first offered me \$19 an hour. His firm was tiny, only nine people. I said, "Thank you. I will think on it." I walked to a good restaurant in my college town and drank a full glass of white wine in the middle of the afternoon. I called him back, I said, "Hello, Peter, I have another offer, but I want to work with you. Would you consider \$30?" In the space between the gin bottles, the [unintelligible 00:14:15] bar showed me a soft-featured girl, skin the color of Hennessy, eyes vacant with fear.

My boss said, like a God granting a boon, "\$23 an hour. You'll relocate to Milwaukee where your client is. I will pay for your apartment."

"That sounds great," I said. I may have added, "I'm honored to get to work for you." All nonsense.

Once I hung up, I punched the air and yelled. I remember the restaurant as deserted, but it may not have been. This is not a story about work or precarity. I'm trying late in the evening to say something about love, which for many of us is not separable from the other shit. As the summer began, I moved to Milwaukee, a rusted city where I had nobody, parents two oceans away. I lay on the sun-warmed wood floor of my paid-for apartment and decided I would be a slut."

Thank you.

**Jung Yun:** Awesome. Thank you so much, Sarah. I teach creative writing, and I'm always telling my students to look for those moments when a story or a novel just grabs you with both fists, and I just remember feeling it so early with yours. That line about the toddlers in a suit -- There are so many different ways of saying that one is sort of pretending to be an adult, and I thought like, "This is a voice that I want to hang out with for a while." So glad I got a chance to hear you read that. Jonathan, let's move to you and talk a little bit about Trelawny.

**Jonathan:** Yes. *If I Survive You* follows a family of Jamaicans who moved from Kingston to Miami in the late 1970s, and various members of the family get points of view, but as you alluded to, Trelawny is kind of the main character of the book. He's the only American-born member of this family of Jamaicans, and as we meet him, he's trying to figure out where it is that he fits within his own family, where he fits within the city of Miami, and how he fits as a Jamaican-American, or a Jamerican as we say, if any of those categories or identities fit him. As he gets older, he graduates from college in the Midwest and he comes back to Miami, and he's decided in a sense to embrace his Jamaicanness in a way that actually makes his father feel very uncomfortable. They wind up getting into an argument, his father kicks him out of his

house, and pretty much for the rest of the book, Trelawny is trying to figure out how to put a roof back over his head.

I came to him as a character -- like, the writer side of me discovered him when I was applying to MFA programs maybe 13 years ago now. I had been writing these characters who were very kind of outside of my personal experience. They were very blank characters who had no racial or ethnic backgrounds, or at least I wasn't talking about them. Much of what I had been reading up to that point performed similarly, so in a sense, I felt like I was copying what I'd been reading rather than taking a look around myself and seeing how people actually live and operate, especially in a multicultural city like Miami where your cultural identity is -- I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration to say it's everything to you in a lot of ways.

I wanted to write, in a sense, a much truer story than I had been attempting to up to that point. That's where I stumbled upon Trelawny and his feelings of frustration within his family, with the family dynamics as this kind of not-quite Jamaican son and not-quite-perfect son of the United States.

**Jung Yun:** Thank you. I believe you're going to read from the first story In Flux.

**Jonathan:** Oh yes, I will read from In Flux. This is the beginning of the book. This is in Trelawny's perspective, and this is just the opening page or so.

"It begins with 'What are you?' Hollered from the perimeter of your front yard when you're nine, younger probably. You'll be asked again throughout junior high and high school, then out in the world in strip clubs, in food courts, over the phone, and at various menial jobs. The askers are expectant. They demand immediate gratification. Their question lifts you slightly off your pre-adolescent toes, tilting you, not just because you don't understand it, but because even if you did understand this question, you wouldn't yet have an answer.

Perhaps it starts with, 'What language is your mother speaking?' This might be the genesis, not because it comes first, but because at least on this occasion, you have some context for the question when it arrives. You immediately resent this question.

'Why's your mother talk so funny?' Your neighbor insists.

Your mother calls to you from the front porch, has called from this perch overlooking the sloping yard since you were allowed to join the neighborhood kids in play. Always, this signals that playtime is over, only now, shame has latched itself to the ritual. Perhaps you'd hoped no one would ever notice. Perhaps you'd never noticed it yourself. Perhaps you ask in shallow protest, 'What do you mean, what language?' Maybe you only think it. Ultimately, you mutter, 'English. She's speaking English,' before going inside, head tucked in embarrassment."

I'll stop there.

**Jung Yun:** Thank you so much. Okay, well, where to begin? I suppose I've always maintained that immigration, even when it happens under the best of circumstances, it can be a very destabilizing act, and sometimes even an outright traumatic one. Let's talk a little bit about the origin stories of your characters and their families in

America. How did Sneha and her parents, how did Topper and Sanya, and how did Cara end up immigrating to the United States? And why did you choose to depict these particular circumstances for their arrival in this country? Anyone can jump in.

**Jonathan:** Oh, for me-- **[unintelligible 00:21:11]** starts. I mean, I approached it in so many different ways, but one way I can't get away from is the fact that my own parents immigrated to the US in the late 1970s, and I am the one US-born member of my immediate family. For me -- I mean, they may have a different perspective on this, but for me growing up in the United States, growing up in our -- whatever it was I made of our class or status, the stories of home that I grew up within my Jamaican household, they were always about Jamaica, and they always sounded in a lot of ways better than what I felt like I was growing up in. My parents were privileged enough to be middle-class Jamaicans, and growing up in the US, as I started to look around and gain awareness, it became apparent that we had lost that solid middle-class status, and my family was kind of on that climb to get back to the middle-class.

At the same time, there was also this, I think, self-esteem that my parents had growing up, looking around and seeing people who looked like them, people in prominent positions who looked like them, being, for the most part, a majority-black country where a racialized experience was not what my parents had to deal with on a day-to-day. There's a way in which, as the next generation, you might -- It's not that you want to oversimplify or over-idealize it, but there are ways in which I felt envious of that experience.

I wanted to talk about that, because often, my experience talking to Americans about Jamaica is that there's this kind of assumption like, "Oh, you must be so grateful that your parents moved you to here because all Jamaicans live in poverty, and the circumstances are so bad in Jamaica that you must--" It's this kind of one-sided flattening of immigrating from the third-world, and now you're in America, congratulations kind of thing. I wanted to take a more nuanced look at what that might be like or what that is like from my perspective to grow up that next-generation with an eye looking forward, but also an eye looking backwards.

**Jung Yun:** Thanks, Jonathan. I relate to a lot of that. My parents were always talking about Korea as sort of the sunnier times of their lives. That just confused me, particularly as a child, thinking like, "Well, why did we come here? Why did we settle in North Dakota of all places?" Yes. Sarah, Angie? Sarah, I think you are on mute.

**Sarah:** It's not like we've been doing this for **[inaudible 00:24:15]**. [chuckles] My protagonist, Sneha, basically comes to the US in her mid-teens, I came in my late teens. Her story is one where basically, she experiences within her family a certain **[unintelligible 00:24:36]** diversion for a period of years of the American dream. Her story is that she comes with her family, there is absolutely hardship and privation -- there always is. I completely agree with you, Jonathan, immigration is a trauma in the best of times. It's a huge rupture in the life of a person or a family, unless you come from very significant wealth and privilege, and you're just moving from cosmopolitan place A to cosmopolitan place B.

Anyway, within Sneha's life for the period of her teens until her late teens, things are looking up for a while. Her dad starts a business, there are all these ways in which they ascend to middle-class, and with the possibility of even years or decades down

the line becoming upper middle-class. Then her dad becomes criminalized. He gets caught up in a case. The book is light on the details, partly because you have adult Sneha talking about this in summary to her friend, and the way that she is as a character, she doesn't like reflecting on the difficult parts of her past, so she tends to skate over them. But in short, the family was criminalized, or specifically Sneha's dad was, and so at the beginning of the book, she makes references to her parents two oceans away, it's because they had to leave. It's because her dad chose to self-deport in lieu of being forcefully deported after he had served his time.

That part is not drawn from life or my own life, it is the experience of people that I know. My family has had a brush with the deportation machine of this country, but it was in my case specifically. But overall, I think that I wanted to figure out how to tell an immigration story that, while it mines certain things that I knew from experience, didn't end up accidentally reifying a certain kind of American exceptionalism. That informed a lot of choices that I made with Sneha's life.

**Jung Yun:** Thank you, Sarah. There's that part where Sneha talks about how her parents were, they won the lottery -- Like, winning the lottery, winning this opportunity to come to America, and it's really sad what happens to her parents. How they have to go back, and she's in this country all by herself and really feeling that sense of loneliness. Thank you. Angie, we already heard that first riveting line from your book, I think where -- Well, no, you didn't actually read that part. Tell us about how Cara Romero came to this country. It is the first line of the book, and it's [crosstalk]--

**Angie:** Yes. I'm sorry, my take was bad, so I guess you didn't hear me telling the story of how I came to that story. Basically, when she came to me, that was -- The first line that came to me that I started writing is actually the first line of the book, which is, "My name is Cara Romero. I came to this country because my husband wanted to kill me." I started there, and I just stayed with her for a year just listening to all the things she wanted to tell me, and it's interesting because usually -- Like, my first novel was about being American, right? Being a New Yorker, being born in New York, and a lot like Jonathan who is like --

Basically, what I love that you do in your book which is similar to some of the things I'm grappling with, is how sometimes there's this assumption that becoming more integrated or Americanized actually has a value. But if our value is that we actually want to go home and feel like we're part of a community, knowing that growing up here, I never felt that I was part of this country, or accepted, or invited, then you lose that, right? Like, my Spanish is not Dominican enough, my English is not American enough, my intonations.

What's interesting about working on this book with Cara Romero is that I'm listening to her, and when I wrote it, I was trying to write it as if she was a Spanish speaker, but she was coming to me as an ESL speaker. I think we're all preoccupied about language because we're constantly code-switching, and I think part of home or what home feels like is language, right? It's like when you hear that familiar sound in language or how people say things or expressions, and writing this book was incredibly challenging because I'm not an ESL speaker. My first language is in English, so I had to actually write in a language that I didn't really know well, and come up with rules around it.

It's been fascinating, because thinking about finding home and the theme of this panel, I feel like where I found it was in translation and working with the translator who translated my books in Spanish. Because in the work of the translation, my characters get closer to some degree to the place that I'm trying to reach that I can't reach, that I haven't been able to find. This game of language to me that I keep exploring and all my books in a very different way are all about finding home. Like, where am I most at home when I'm constantly code-switching?

**Jung Yun:** Thank you so much, Angie. I'm actually going to read a quote from your book. This is narrated by Cara who says, "It is not easy to say I am American, because when someone says American, they don't imagine me," which I just think is such a beautiful line. It gets at some of the difficulty of claiming America as one's home, even if they have lived there for a very long time, which is Cara's case, she's been here for over two decades. Also, Trelawny's case, even though he was born in the US and is a second-generation immigrant. What kind of tensions related to identity and acceptance were you really grappling with and committed to including in your books, and what particular challenges were there in doing that work well on the page?

[silence]

**Jung Yun:** Jump in, someone. Angie, your connection is much better, by the way, so we're all set.

**Angie:** I'm using my phone now. Thank you.

**Jung Yun:** Yes, thank you.

**Sarah:** My internet timed out briefly--

**Jonathan:** Oh, yes. I think mine did too.

**Sarah:** I'm so sorry, it was a disaster. There was a siren that came by, my internet timed out, so could you repeat the question just one more time?

**Jung Yun:** Sure. Let's just talk a little bit about the tensions related to identity and acceptance that you were really committed to threading through your book, and if there were any particular challenges in doing that work well.

**Sarah:** I can try. I think that one of the things that I was trying to grapple with was, given that this was a novel that was attempting to chart what it means to be in community, what did it look like for this young person, Sneha, who is from a different place, right? Who is in a variety of ways, not American. Who is in some ways starting -- Like we're observing her in the process of becoming American, which is in so many ways, an accumulation of time and choice of affiliation. I found myself wondering, well, why doesn't she go to the place where her parents are, go to her home of origin? What is her reasoning? For her, the specific character, it's a reasoning based in meaningful part on this very traumatic, very violent thing that was done to her within her community, within her extended family that she has come to associate with her place of origin.



The reason I bring that up is I think that it helps me identify, because for me, so much of writing is my attempt to think through something. It helped me identify a central tension that I was trying to explore, which is that community is not actually this unalloyed good. Community is nothing more or less than other people, and sometimes the communities we find ourselves in are not wonderful for us. I think sometimes communities are just nothing more or nothing less than the question of who they center and who they exclude. That is the definition of what it means to be a community, it needs to have some boundary around it.

Thinking through that, I think being able to articulate that made me think, "Okay, this particular immigration story, this particular coming of age story is going to be the charting of someone who starts out atomized and alone, and really the victim of a lot of indignity in her work, in her immigration journey, et cetera, and ends up in a 'we', ends up with this sort of bastion of found family -- multiracial found family."

**Jung Yun:** Thank you. Jonathan? Angie?

**Jonathan:** I love the way you framed that, the boundaries of who is accepted and who is excluded. I think that's largely what Trelawny is dealing with. He's yearning to be accepted, embraced. There's a point in the first story where it's the Puerto Rican kids who embrace him because they feel he looks more like them at the school. He hasn't quite realized that they have kind of misidentified him, but he does know that he's finally embraced, and he's willing to go with that for as long as he can, until they realize in fact that he's of Jamaican background. By the determination of everyone at the school, he should be with the Jamaican kids, but the Jamaican kids aren't embracing him for a number of reasons.

I wanted to explore those kind of realities of what happens at that age. This is happening around middle school and high school as people start to self-segregate. The challenge, I think, from the writer's perspective is thinking about that dynamic, thinking about other dynamics within the African diaspora. I'll say for us in the Black community, we have these diaspora wars where it's like African-American and Afro-Caribbean and African from the continent having these perceived tensions, however real or imagined, or exacerbated online. I wanted to talk about what I believe to be both happening without actually, again, exacerbating anything. For me, that's where bringing in real-life experience became important, because I didn't want to --

It's like if you go into a fiction workshop, oftentimes, you're told conflict is the heart of it, or maybe character is the heart, but the conflict should come from the character. And so you're doing this math that tells you, "Okay, explore the conflict, explore the conflict." That was a place where I thought it would be unethical to try to explore the conflict just to exploit it for material gain. But trying to actually accurately talk about, again, a multicultural city like Miami, where there are these smaller tensions where people will still get along, they'll still marry into a different culture, and then still hold prejudices against that culture, and they'll be aired at the dinner table. People will just agree to disagree and still get along, and still create families, and children, and multiple generations of this, but trying to find that fine line was -- Even talking about it now, I feel very uncomfortable. [chuckles] That's why I'm a writer, because as a writer, it's like, "Okay, I can dot my I's and cross my T's and make sure I'm communicating this effectively in a way that isn't just adding to the problem."

**Jung Yun:** I loved what you said about MFA programs. Like, the things that we were taught and told, and how -- I don't know, upon rethinking some things, maybe there's a better way sometimes. Thanks, Jonathan. Angie, how about you?

**Angie:** I love that you're saying that you feel uncomfortable -- I mean, I feel like it is uncomfortable. This is why I'm a writer too, and I feel like we chose to write it through, right? Think it through our writing. I have a 15-year-old kid, and he said to me, "Mom, is it weird that I feel like I belong nowhere?"

I said, "What do you mean?"

He goes, "I don't know. Like, I'm Dominican, but I'm not Dominican. I'm Italian, but I'm not Italian. I'm not even a New Yorker--"

He feels like every space feels a little bit like his, but none of them quite feel like all his, or that people actually get him, and I said, "Oh, you're having the immigrant experience."

We're in constant motion, and I want to say not just physical motion, but I feel like what I've realized through writing is that we also concurrently live in many different time periods. What I mean by that is that something that happened that is like a nostalgia of my mother is still as present as something that's happening right now in my life. In some ways, you think time is not linear when you're thinking about all these different spaces that still are very much alive in every day. In a moment like now where there's so much -- People are like, I feel like -- I don't know.

You're in the US, and people wake up, and they're like, "Oh my God, something's happening abroad."

And I'm like, "Oh my God, what's happening now?"

Like every day, something's happening abroad. As an immigrant, I feel, at least in my life, I'm constantly thinking about, as I'm here, there's so much going on that is connected to my reality that is scary and terrifying all the time. Like, we can't stop thinking about it because we're still tethered in a way to all these places, and they're also as real as being here. That has to do with our histories. In my book, *Cara Romero*, she left because her husband was trying to kill her. I mean, Dominican Republic right now is very high up on the list of femicides. It's something that is -- Domestic violence, young girls being married off because there's no way to survive outside of partnership. It's very, very scary what's happening, so when we talk about migration, or like "Why don't you go home," for me it's a privilege.

I could travel, I could maybe decide to go back, but most people can't. I feel like writing through it and feeling uncomfortable around that privilege, but also that estrangement, because we do have access, and we do have resources, and living with all of that concurrently, it's hard to talk about. That's what we have to write the books. It's a lot. It's so much.

**Jung Yun:** It really is. Thank you, Angie. I'm going to skip ahead a little bit because I can't believe how much time is zooming past me right now. One of the things that I just remember very vividly from my childhood is that my parents were always

working, and it was very, very normal in our household to not see one or both of them for most of the waking hours of the day between my school hours and their work hours. It wasn't until I was older that I realized that because they had moved so far away from their families and were so cut off from them, and because we lived in North Dakota where there wasn't an Asian-American community, much less a Korean-American community, they just had absolutely no safety net whatsoever. Work is a subject that crosses over all three of your books. I'd love to spend a little bit of time talking about the jobs that your characters have, what they do for work, and why you chose to give them those particular jobs.

**Sarah:** I can go first and quick. My character is Sneha is a junior change management consultant which, during a lot of the book, you see that she is a glorified intern, I use the phrase corporate flunky. Things go badly with her work, especially later in the novel. There's a period of time where she is functionally unemployed because her boss is committing wage theft against her. She starts to work at Leon's, a Milwaukee institution, which it serves custard, so she's a custard scooper. Those are the two main jobs I would say.

**Jung Yun:** I love how management consultants sounds like such a appealing job to some people, but it's really the most soul-sucking, spreadsheet-producing work that one could possibly do.

**Sarah:** Oh, yes, absolutely. It's really devoid of glamor.

**Jung Yun:** Yes, absolutely.

**Jonathan:** I love the question. I was very much a latchkey kid, come home, open the can of Chef Boyardee, and see my parents sometime I guess. Yes, my characters have so many jobs in the book, and Trelawny in particular, takes on a lot of strange jobs. At the beginning of a story in the book called *Odd Jobs*, he actually starts listing all of the weird jobs he's taken on, like working at an exotic animals dealer and trying to wrangle a Cayman for the owner of the place, or serving poolside and a Speedo or-- he starts taking on these weird jobs from Craigslist.

For me, I get distracted if I'm reading a book that doesn't pay attention to where the money's coming from, like how is a person actually surviving and paying their rent as whatever else is happening in the story is happening. I wanted to pay a lot of attention to that. I also found-- when I was very broke and trying to figure out if I could actually survive and be a writer also, I would troll Craigslist, maybe troll isn't the right word, but I would be on it looking for these jobs that I could pick up. It was the ones that I didn't feel any safety or-- I think my good sense saved me from actually showing up for these more out there jobs.

My memory, I latched onto some of these. For instance, one job, the latter job that he picks up in the book, he sees a post from a well-to-do white couple who's asking for a tall, heavy Black man to show up and watch them in bed. That's supposed to have seen several times on the internet, many times over, really. I wanted to explore again, identity and race and Blackness through that lens of, well, what is it actually like? What's the essence of what they want from the Black body? What value is the Black body adding to that bedroom and their sexual life?

I had to imagine my way into that story and that's where I started thinking about the more tried and true version of, "Well, where could this go in terms of conflict and what happens after he watches them in bed? What's going to be the next thing that happens when he shows up to this condo and this wealthier part of Miami?" I think seeing what people are actually-- because I feel like the seedier parts of the internet are really great places to find a source of inspiration for fiction, but then unless you are actually going to put yourself in that position, the imagination takes over from there.

**Jung Yun:** I think I'm probably old enough to be Trelawny's mom, and there are several points in the book where I'm like, "Oh God, please don't take that job. Please don't take that job." Of course, he takes those jobs, and it does create really rich situations for storytelling. Oh, Trelawny. Angie, Cara is actually looking for work, and that is the premise of your book. She does a lot of other work that I would love to hear about.

**Angie:** Yes. In this book, it's basically organized in 12 sessions. In each session, she's going to this program during the great recession that is called the Senior Workforce Program, and the senior-- I'm sorry, I don't know what's happening. Can you hear me?

**Jung Yun:** Yes,

**Angie:** Okay. It's a loud horn. It's like they don't want me to speak. New York doesn't want me to speak. In these 12 sessions, she's speaking to a job counselor who's trying to help her find work. I was going to look for it. I was like, "I'm going to try to find this line because I don't-- it was just so funny when I wrote it, I laughed out loud. Basically, she's being asked in a job application, "When can you work?" She says, "Well, I can work all the time. I need a job. I can work at all hours, except I can't work between 6:00 and 9:00 because I'm picking up the kids, and I can't work between like 3:00 and 4:00 because that's when I make lunch for the elder. Then I can't work from this time to this time. Yes, I'm available at all hours."

I feel like what I realized in writing the book, and I think it leads to one of the questions of one of the audience members, is like in writing the book, what I discovered is that even if she really wanted to work after working 26 years at this factory, maybe she should be subsidized to do all the invisible labor that she's been doing for the community all these years.

Her not working actually just gave her a lot more time to do all the things our system is not doing for taking care of children, the elderly, the neighborhood. I didn't realize it when I started it, but when I ended the book, I was like, "Oh yes, this is in some ways trying to make visible what so many people I know are doing and elders are doing in the community when they're being called unemployed."

**Jung Yun:** The structure is absolutely brilliant, Angie. I do love by the time we get to the end of the book, we see how hard this woman is working when she's supposedly not working in the ways that would count for Social Security or a labor stat or something like that. She is hardworking all the time.

**Angie:** The thing is that it's an important thing to keep bringing up in a moment where-- especially the migrant, oh my God, I'm surrounded by in New York City, people who have just been brought into New York City without support systems. I think the rhetoric about immigrants is this lazy, certain kinds of immigrants, and in reality, I'm like, "I don't know anyone who's not working all the time." It's impossible to live in New York and not work all the time. In some ways, I think it's really important that we keep thinking or at least renaming Congresswoman--

**Sarah:** Sorry, keep going.

**Angie:** No, it's just renaming what that looks like, or rethinking about that because it's problematic. Anyway, go ahead, Sarah. Sorry. I heard somebody,

**Jung Yun:** Oh, I think that was Sarah, but I think she just muted herself, so we're good. I know that we've been talking a lot about tensions and difficulties. I don't want to give the audience the wrong impression because within each of these books, there is love and friendship and joy and humor, whether that comes from the communities that these characters are a part of or somewhere deep within their own reserves. Could we spend a little bit of time talking about that aspect of your books? Where does all this come from?

**Sarah:** I think that in my writing, I often look for this question of where can the reader find pleasure? What is actually joyful or joyous to read? Where can you find beauty? Where can you find meaning? I think that especially working as artists in 2023 or in the 2020s, we're given so many reasons to despair, frankly. When I was trying to locate where pleasure could be found in the pages that I was writing even before I knew what this book was or was going to be, I kept thinking about, "Yes, what was pleasurable for me to read?" I was like, "I want to read a love story, so I'm going to try to write a love story."

Then as I started working my way through the love story, that is one of the strands of all this could be different between Sneha and her eventual girlfriend, Marina. They have a will-they-won't-they thing that I've heard a reader call a little bit like Sally **[unintelligible 00:51:32]** that they're young people who are missing the mark with each other continually. I also found myself wondering about the ways in which-- it can be possible to overly reify or to treat as sacrosanct societally the unit of the romantic couple and the romantic partnership.

The more I paid attention to my dumbass 22-year-old character, the more I felt confident that she would not be finding the love and partnership of her life at this point in time. All this could be different became this story of friendship and deep and abiding friendship and the way it can carry you through life and through really hard and dark moments. I felt interested, I think, in exploring this question of what is it we owe our friends.

There's a point in the novel where Sneha midway through is just matter-of-factly, when her best friend, Tig, starts to date somebody seriously, somebody who becomes their eventual partner, and she's like, "It's the way of the world." Your close friends are an audition for what eventually happens, which is you find they're the holding place for your eventual husband or wife or what have you. This book was in

some ways an attempt to undermine that a little bit to show that friendship is valuable on its own terms.

**Jung Yun:** I love Tig. I feel like we should all have a friend like Tig or aspire to be like Tig as a friend to others. Great. Jonathan, Angie?

**Jonathan:** [chuckles] Reading Sarah's book, I enjoy just hanging out with those characters. I've told Sarah that before, but it was like, "Oh--

**Sarah:** That's how I feel about both your books? That's so lovely to hear.

**Jonathan:** I don't know. My main character tends to be searching for the connection. He wants a kind of love that he's never really felt from his own father. His romantic relationships are failing him, and I think in a way part of that is part of our economic system that he's-- At one point, he reflects on the fact that he starts seeing someone, but she realizes that he's living out of his vehicle, and that's no place to maybe start the relationship from or so he is told.

*If I Survive You*, apart from the second person where these characters are sometimes talking to themselves and telling themselves the story of what's happened, there's a lot of direct address in the book. I felt like Trelawny was reaching out to the reader in a sense, and trying to get that sense of connection and saying-- At times he asks you, "What would you do in this particular circumstance," especially as it pertains to his trying to navigate moral ambiguities.

The humor I think is, I don't know, it's just the easier and the harder part for me to answer because I think it's difficult to talk about what makes a book funny or humorous. At the same time, I think it's a very natural tool for people who feel disempowered to use humor as a coping mechanism and use it against these bigger structures that they otherwise can't topple as an individual human being. For me, that was a big part of it.

I think to be really funny, you have to be really smart, and I think creating a character who I-- even though he is often failing to do certain things, he's also really good at pointing out some of the absurdities about life, and pointing out why certain systems are either failing or working in the way that they were meant to oppress us. In that, I feel like there's a comfort in traveling on this journey with him because you know he has this sharp tool in order to really unpack the way the world might work.

**Angie:** I was thinking about this question of pleasure. When you said pleasure, I was like, "Oh, yes, let's talk about pleasure." [laughs] How beautiful. I also was thinking for a lot of us, we were writing also in this time or editing during pandemic. I feel like definitely in both your works, Jonathan, the way you use language, it was so inspiring. When I was reading it, I was just like, "Oh my God, language, how beautiful." It's like eating something rich. I listened to your book, Sarah, and I remember re-listening to it because it was so sensual, tactile. I literally felt like I was touching people.

I feel like one of the things that I have found that have happened with us, at least me reading on my phone-- I read a lot of essays, I'm scanning, scanning, scanning. I'm trying to get the information. We're artists. We have to remember, we're artists, so

what do we do? As artists is try to do it differently. Perfect title, all this could be different. The ways we tell the story should be different. The way we use language is different. The things we should be pointing at toward should be different. Thinking about rethinking friendships like, why have we let TV hijack what friendships look like, or coming home looks like, or what language looks like, or the hierarchy?

In some ways what I appreciate about what's happening now in literature is that we're literally just rejecting all of that, and just saying, "You know what? ESL is English." That's cool. I think it was Jonathan-- I don't know if you said an interview or, I don't know, I think you said this about Miami and Jamaica and language about how the more Jamaican you sound, the more valuable you're seeing in part of the community versus-- What was it that you said?

**Jonathan:** Again, there's an assumption that this movement towards what we might believe to be is a standard American English, or-- I don't think we would put the word dialect on it, but within Jamaican communities in the United States, the more you hold onto the Jamaican Patois, the accent, the language, that's where you're higher up in the hierarchy within our community is what I mean to say. I think that's not just happening with Jamaicans in Miami. I think that's happening with a lot of communities in Miami because last statistic I saw was that Miami was the city that had the most people who were born outside of the United States.

Those populations coming together, we're not necessarily subject to the same pressures to assimilate because in a place like Miami, what are you assimilating into when the dominant culture-- We're certainly influenced by the rest of America and TV and media and all of those things. I don't mean to suggest we're not, but when you go outside and you actually see your neighbors, most of us are hanging onto some elements of our cultures and languages is a massive part of that, obviously, in all the ways that it operates in complex ways.

**Jung Yun:** It is eight o'clock already, so I'm going to turn it over to the Q&A board. There is still time for members of the audience to get their questions in, and we'll do our best to get to as many of them as possible. Let's see. The first one is, "I'm wondering if the authors could describe their writing communities. Who do they turn to for moral support, craft advice, et cetera?" Great question.

**Jonathan:** I'm someone who's been in some form of-- I'm institutionalized, but I have the MFA, and then I got into a PhD, but then Stanford Stegner fellowship took me away. I've had the privilege of being around a lot of mostly really intelligent people who have craft on the mind and fiction on the mind, and who are in a position where they want to exchange work, and they want to sit around and talk about writing. Now that I've finished with the Stegner, we'll see what that looks like. Those have been my-- It's evolved over the years.

I have some of my favorite readers, some of whom I met in college. I think it can be helpful to, in a sense, vary your go-to readers just because after a certain point, you understand what I'm trying to do almost too well. You trust me too much. After a while, I'm handing you that 300 pages and you're saying, "You know what? This is what Jonathan goes after. He does that kind of thing. You're good to go." I still think you need to be challenged a little bit. I think it's helpful if people understand your

intentions, but a little bit of pushback if you're really trying to push yourself, push the envelope can be helpful. Can be helpful.

**Jung Yun:** Thanks, Jonathan.

**Angie:** I feel like I love talking about this particular book. I wrote a lot of it, pretty isolated. What happens is, after you write a number of books, you don't want anyone to read your work because you don't want to burden them. You just don't want to burden people with your writing, your bad writing, and maybe you're just too embarrassed because you're supposed to have figured it out. The truth is, every book, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm totally as lost. It's like you have this amnesia of how a novel works.

In this particular book, when I was working on it, because it was set-- it's all monologues, I would read it out loud all the time. I learned something about community and writing. I do have a few friends that if I'm really desperate, I'll reach out to them, but because I was reading it out loud at home a lot, I would find whoever was in my house became my best person to hear my story. They necessarily weren't writers. I had a friend who was staying with me for two days, and she was listening to me and she goes, "Oh my God, I'm an actress. I could read this. This as a monologue." She started reading it. When she started reading it, and she was an ESL speaker, it was like a gift.

I realized there were so many opportunities I was missing because she was fumbling. Then I was correcting like a playwright. Then another instance, my kid, he would just hang out on the sofa while I was reading the book out loud. He said, "Mom, I think you can make-- what if she doesn't throw the iron at him?" I was like, "What are you talking about? You're listening to what I'm reading out loud." I thought he was scrolling his phone. He's like, "Of course I'm listening. You're telling a story." He actually helped me fix a plot point. He's like, "If you change something here, it will open it up, so something else can happen later."

He watches a lot of *Star Wars* and Marvel Universe, so he's really interested in plots that stay open for other plots. I said, "Wait, I never even thought to ask him." Because he is a kid. I'm like, "What are you going to know about this 56-year-old woman who's estranged from her son?" My advice is always, like Jonathan is saying, like, "Yes, you could be part of the institution," but sometimes writers are not even your best readers when you're in process. Sometimes you need a fresh ear.

**Jung Yun:** I think that's very fair.

**Jonathan:** I love that writers and readers sometimes pay attention to vastly different things, and you need that reader perspective. I love that.

**Sarah:** My response is similar to Angie's, where-- well, I think the overarching truth of my response is I'm figuring it out because I think that one of the things I'm learning as I write what I hope will become book number two, is that you can figure it out for your first book, and then you're back to the mud again, back to square one with your second. I think that with all this could be different. I reached out to writer friends, which I was lucky to have for a variety of reasons. I live in New York now. I did



graduate school in creative writing. The first five readers of *All This Could Be Different*, only one of them was a writer.

I wanted this book to be read by my friends in Milwaukee, my working-class friends, my friends who were readers, partly because it felt so important to me that I write something that felt accessible in some way. I think that I'm really with both of you in that. I try for a mix of writers who I think are really canny and wise about craft, and people who read, who love words, who are living regular lives and have regular person pressures. To see if our pages can hold their attention, I think is a really useful test.

The last thing I'll say very quickly, based on the spirit of the question, it wasn't just about who is your reader. It was about who is your community who keeps you humble and cared for and all the rest of it. I think that that for me and for many people is the work of a lifetime. It's slow, ongoing work. All this could be different really happened in so many ways because I was doing a lot of organizing work in my community at the time, and I reached out to other people who were doing it with me. I was like, "Hey, I want to take a little bit of a step back and work on this book," which meant that literally my comrades, my fellow organizers had to do way more,

For a period of like two months, their workloads increased by a measurable amount of hours. They each had to do like six more hours of work a week or something. I've never forgotten that. I thank them in my acknowledgments. It isn't lost on me that in my novel where I was writing about interdependence and care, the novel itself was made possible by other people's care.

**Angie:** I want to add because I know we have to wrap up but, Sarah, asking for support is the way to get support. It never occurred to me as an immigrant daughter. We're not supposed to say we need anything, but actually asking for support, like you said, "I'm going to take a step back," even if that means that some people have to step up, it's just the only way it's going to happen. If you're really going to believe in interdependence, then you actually have to also be okay with asking for support.

**Sarah:** I love that so much.

**Jung Yun:** That's beautifully said, Angie. Thank you. Let's see what the question board has. There is a question for Jonathan that I want to make sure we ask because I do wonder about it myself. How did you work to create short stories that could stand alone but also as the novel? What are the challenges and benefits of a story cycle like this?

**Jonathan:** Oh, so hard. It was the hardest thing about writing the book. I kicked myself and cursed myself at a certain point once I realized that's what I had done. I went into the book wanting to do that. I thought I was just going to call it a novel, but I wanted it to be the perfect novel, which meant I wanted it to be-- I love what Angie was saying earlier about we're artists and we want to challenge ourselves, and we want to do things differently. We want people to see the world anew through our creations.

The great challenge there is that I think if you call it a novel, we can rightfully assume what order you're going to read it in. That then creates certain expectations around

the connectivity and how much space you're leaving between what you would call chapters. When I realized that wasn't exactly the kind of book I was writing, and that I would need to be calling it something closer to a link story collection, I had the challenge of not having each story be redundant. I wondered, if they're going to stand alone, well, do I have to reestablish where this family's from, who these characters are in every single story, or am I just kind of diving in with an assumption that readers have met these characters before in some way?

That was tough. If you're a writer yourself and you're trying to do it, I would say add more information and then come back to it and carve away because for me it stopped my writing for a while. I wasn't smart enough to figure it out for a while until I was. I realized afterwards the help of agents and editors and other wise people can help you in determining what's extra, what's redundant, and then creating threads. What brings it all together is the threads that-- it's like a detail in the first story that I bring back somewhere in the middle of the book that I then conclude in the final story.

That was the funnest part actually. Just going through, reading the whole manuscript, making a list of all the details and seeing how many of those I could thread throughout the entire book one by one because there's a real pleasure. We talked about pleasure, there's a real pleasure for the reader when they come to that really great use of repetition where it's like, "Oh, I thought that one detail was insignificant, and now it's come back," and that was actually powerful.

Then you explode that on the page in the good way as a writer and dissatisfying for a writer to do as well. Drawing those threads throughout without worrying too much about the redundancy, and then eventually cutting out the redundancy was the thing. It's about as articulate as I can be about it right now.

**Jung Yun:** Jonathan, *Under the Ackee Tree*, did that first appear in *The Paris Review*?

**Jonathan:** That was in *The Paris Review*, yes.

**Jung Yun:** I remember reading that when it first came out and just falling in love with that voice and thinking, "Oh, this author must be writing an entire novel built around Topper's voice." Then to see it as a short story in a link connection and how each story builds into the other and layers upon each other, it's just so beautifully and intricately done. It just makes me jealous and want to write short stories, which I will never do. I just love the structure of that.

**Jonathan:** Thank you. Appreciate it.

**Jung Yun:** I'm looking at the time. We have basically come to the end. Please don't go anywhere yet because I'm going to ask Caroline Schreiber, PEN/Faulkner's director of development to join us for a second. Before we hear from Caroline, I just want to thank our authors for being part of this program, and to thank all of you for being with us tonight. These are really hard and challenging and confusing times, so please do take good care of yourselves, take good care of each other. With that, I will just say thank you, and over to Caroline.

**Caroline Schreiber:** Thanks, Jung, and thank you to all of our panel for this really excellent discussion. It's been fun to watch. My name is Caroline Schreiber, and I'm PEN/Faulkner's Director of Development. As you probably already know from joining this conversation, PEN/Faulkner reaches thousands of readers and writers and students every year through literary programs like this one, education programs, and partnership with DC Title 1 schools and our annual awards. We are a nonprofit organization, so we rely on donations from readers and writers like you all to accomplish our mission.

I'm here tonight in particular because we have an exciting opportunity. We've just announced a \$100,000 matching challenge in support of the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the short story, which means that when you give, your donation will have double the impact. Every dollar counts. We're already about a quarter of the way towards meeting our goal for this year. My ask for you tonight is this, will you give \$5 to support great literature? You can donate before you log off tonight by using the link in the chat.

Speaking of supporting great literature, we hope you'll join us in person for this year's PEN/Malamud Award ceremony that will be held at American University in DC on December 1st. Thank you all so much again for joining us tonight, and thank you in advance for supporting PEN/Faulkner. We hope to see you all again soon. Good night.

**[01:13:07] [END OF AUDIO]**