

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long:

Hello. I'm Karen Long, and you're listening to The Asterisk*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today, we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with Peter Ho Davies, a novelist and beloved professor at the University of Michigan. Professor Davies won a 2017 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for his novel, "The Fortunes," which he has described as, "examining the burdens, limitations, and absurdity of Asian stereotypes." Juror Joyce Carol Oates called it a prophetic work. Little did she know how prescient and urgent it would be. Welcome, Professor Davies.

Peter Ho Davies:

I'm very flattered to be here with you today, Karen, so thank you for inviting me on. I have a feeling that the times we're living through are making us all feel like less than prophets, so it seems particularly hubristic and impossible at this particular moment to claim prophecy. I think this moment is causing lots of reflection for all of us in so many different ways. I have a feeling that for writers especially it's an important moment for some humility, and I think I'm certainly feeling that.

Karen Long:

I see that, but I also see the bone structure of "The Fortunes" as giving us something to this moment, because you back us up and you take us through four overtures to think about the history of Chinese-American people. I was so struck going through again the first section on Ah Ling. He is, of course, someone you created out of a reference you read, of a manservant to Charles Crocker, who was a railroad baron in the 1860s. When you've spoken about him, you've called him Asian Zero.

Peter Ho Davies:

Yeah. Probably because I think the references to him in the histories, or really I should say the hagiographies of Crocker, who's an early railroad baron. In those histories, he's often sort of touted as a hero of capitalism I think in certain ways.

Ah Ling is really just an object for Crocker's inspiration, so to speak, in those texts. The inspiration is that he sort of persuades Crocker, somewhat against the grain of contemporary wisdom in that day, to imagine a Chinese, who seemed, I think to Western eyes, white eyes, as sort of frail and small, but nonetheless very strong. So Crocker looks at Ling, recognizes his strength. He thinks, "Oh, if they're all that strong, I can hire them all to build my railroad." Of course, the hagiographies tend not to include the fact that, "If they're all as cheap as him, they'll also be able to build my railroad for less money than other labor."

Karen Long:

Right.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Peter Ho Davies:

... "employ in various ways." Ah Ling in that sense inspires the hiring of 10,000 of his countrymen, many of whom were in the US already. They'd come for the gold rush, but many of them also came exclusively to the country to work on the railroad. So he's sort of the source, I think, not just of keeping a lot of Chinese laborers who'd come for the gold in the US, those who might have returned as the gold rush began to end, but also for inspiring the immigration of another wave of Chinese male labor.

Karen Long:

It's so interesting that if I understand it correctly, this notion of the model minority and his impeccable service to Crocker. It's embedded, at least in the novel, if not in the culture.

Peter Ho Davies:

Yeah. I'm very interested in the book in thinking about what we've inherited from our ancestors in various ways. I think that partly is also some modes of representation for a group, for a race, for an ethnicity that have come down through generations. That's partly at the door of those individuals, but also those who employed them, those who hired them, those who imagined them, I think in some ways as well, which also means the larger culture in various ways. So Ling does feel as though he's a progenitor in part of a certain image of Asian Americans and particularly Chinese Americans.

Karen Long:

Now, Professor Davies, would you mind giving our listeners a sample of the first section of "The Fortunes," which discusses the life of Anna May Wong, the first Chinese actress to star in Hollywood.

Peter Ho Davies:

Already tall for her age, she had begun to model fur coats in newspaper advertisements for a customer who'd been impressed by her posture when she delivered laundry. She tried to give the money to her father, but he didn't like the pose she struck. He was ironing. "A disgrace," he called it. "Do you know no shame?" He doused the linen with his brass sprayer. She tried to tell him it was acting, but the distinction was lost on him. "Who acts like a whore, I ask you? Whores, that's who." He pushed the money away. "I am no pimp."

He was wrong. She knew all about shame. Hadn't she grown up washing and ironing other people's unmentionables? She once told an interviewer she changed the spelling from M-A-E to M-A-Y, "To give myself permission." "Permission for what?" "Why everything."

Peter Ho Davies:

It's funny. As you know, I'm also a teacher of creative writing. I've actually just been teaching a class last week at a summer conference thinking about the way that certain books, certain texts give writers permission, I think, so that we read something, and I think the way actually to characterize those books

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

is we read it and we go, "You're not allowed to do that, are you?" We're a little horrified initially. Then we think about it for a moment longer. We say with excitement, "Oh, you *can* do that." So it feels as though a door has been opened, I think, in various ways. So I think a lot of us are looking for those moments of permission, right? There are also moments we might describe even of welcome, allowing us into a space in some sense as well.

Karen Long:

Right.

Peter Ho Davies:

That's certainly true for writers. But Anna May, I think, is one of those people who's not just going through a door, but she's also opening that door and I suppose, in some sense, holding it open, one would like to hope, for others to follow. Although it's been a long journey, she's our first Chinese American movie star, and there was quite a long period of time before we had more that were able to follow her through that door.

Karen Long:

Your care with language, to me, comes through. It's the adjustment of the single letter, from M-A-E to M-A-Y, that is enlarging an identity for an audience. The multiplicity of views is ever-present in your writing and thinking.

Peter Ho Davies:

Yeah. I think it's a pleasure... I mean, it's a very writerly pleasure with language. I find myself to be susceptible to word play and to punning. Now that I'm getting on in years, my teenage son would probably like to call these versions of dad jokes that find their way onto the page. And that's probably true, I think all writers are susceptible to those meanings of language, are often interested in those multiple meanings in language, I think, in various ways.

But I also think, or came to the feeling as I was moving my way through the writing of "The Fortunes," which was really an exploration of my relationship to my Chinese heritage. I'm half-Chinese by blood, but as I've often said, probably much less than half-Chinese by culture having grown up in Britain, not being a Chinese speaker. The book was really not my sense of my own expertise in the subject, but my own exploration of my relationship to the identity in certain ways as well.

One of the pleasures, I think, of that writing and that recognition of that punning desire, is that I think in Chinese, in the language, not that I speak it but my understanding of it is, there's great pleasure in jokes that work around punnings, the double meanings of words. I've occasionally been on the receiving end of those jokes from family members in my halting efforts to speak some Chinese, but I'd like to think that

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

in a small way, that otherwise writerly predilection for puns and language play feels like it might be mildly inherited, I suppose, from my Chinese roots as well.

Karen Long:

I also think it's a brilliant strategy to use humor to let the light in. Nobody likes to be lectured to.

Karen Long:

I'm just going to indulge myself once more in a little passage toward the end, when you're in the final fourth of the novel with the voice of John, who's gone to China to adopt a daughter. He is thinking about these questions that we're talking about. There's a lot of meta in this last bit, and he says, "He went to a Halloween party once as the Tank Man, the unknown and likely disappeared fellow who'd faced down the tanks in Tiananmen Square. White shirt, black pants, laden with plastic bags in each hand. No one caught it. The most iconic Chinese figure of the decade, and no one recognized him. The nearest anyone guessed was delivery guy. Several of his friends seemed puzzled that he'd come as another Chinese, as if it weren't a costume."

Peter Ho Davies:

I've been thinking oddly about that passage a little bit lately, as we've seen our own version of tanks, armored police vehicles on the streets, particularly in DC, and trying to imagine what an American equivalent of Tank Man would look like. That image has been coming back to me, and of course in that context, we see that beneath that little effort at comedy there's much darker, much starker space to think about.

It's making me think a little bit, and maybe rethink, I think a lot of us are rethinking the ways we think about questions of identity and questions of race at the moment. I'm certainly not immune from that by any means. I guess I'm thinking about the way I think about humor in that context. I mean, I think a lot of the time, I construe it as a mechanism of defense, I think, in various ways. It's also a way of rising above, and so I'm very much drawn to political satire. All of us watch this stuff at the moment, of course, as well. But I'm also trying to think my way through to that space where we also have to find ways of expressing what's going on in ways that are deadly earnest and deadly serious, because of course they are as well.

There's a kind of odd way in which I think about the ability to joke about it as being in itself a kind of version of privilege, actually. It's funny, I was thinking about my mother who's back in Britain at the moment and alone and grappling, under the circumstances, quite well with lockdown. She's always been very good, I think — and I think I learned this and it was empowering for me as a child — at sort of shrugging off racist slights, meeting them with a kind of humor, that kind of understanding of that person just knows nothing and therefore it sort of bounces off her. She often would retell small anecdotes like

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

that with a joking sense of, "Look how ridiculous this person is for mistaking this about me, or that about me."

That, for me as a child, was useful. It was useful armor, it was a useful way of approaching the world. But it also was a luxury. I was on the receiving end of taunts and some unkind language, and certainly sideways looks in certain circumstances. But it's hard to joke your way out of spaces of physical violence that we're seeing many people having to struggle with in various ways. I've been lucky never to have to confront that space.

The humor itself was a useful way of grappling with this space, and I do think it's a tool and a power to look at racists and racism as a foolishness. But it's also much more than that, and the consequences of it, ridiculous as it might be, seem a lot darker, of course. We're being very powerfully reminded of that at the moment.

Karen Long:

As you know, Professor Davies, we like to get out of the way of the art on *The Asterisk**. Would you please read to us from the third section of "The Fortunes"? This is a section in the voice of the friend of Vincent Chin. Vincent Chin was the American man who, in 1982, was beaten to death by two unemployed Detroit auto workers who mistook him for a Japanese-American and took his life.

Peter Ho Davies:

The thing about racism, I always think, the worst thing, okay? Is not that someone has made up their mind about you without knowing you, based on the color of your skin, the way you look, some preconception. The worst thing is, they might be right. Stereotypes cling if they have a little truth. They sting by the same token. A lot of us do work hard. Many of us, those who hail from Canton, anyway, are short. Some of us do have small... and yes, as Evans' complaint about Vincent's tipping suggests, some of us are cheap. Like our food, our goods, our labor.

How would you feel if I called you racist? The white stereotype. But some of you are racist, right? It doesn't mean that that's true, that what's true of the many has to be true of the one, any more than what's true of the one must be true of the many.

Peter Ho Davies:

Yeah, I mean, that's a section, of course, that has returned to me a great deal. Not just in the present moment but really over the last few years as well. Of course, there's been a rise in hate crime towards Chinese-Americans and Asian-Americans generally over the last few months. But it feels as though there's been a hostile energy about race, about immigration, driven by a kind of economic anxiety that's been very prevalent for the last four or five years. And that very much dovetails with our relationship in

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

terms of what's going on in Detroit in '82, where people are anxious about Japanese car imports, all that kind of stuff.

Karen Long:

Right.

Peter Ho Davies:

And for me, too, I should say, it's funny you mentioned the British accent. Oddly, I think, one of the reasons I connected to that story of Vincent in Detroit is because where I grew up in England, in a town called Coventry, was very much the heart of car country in Britain as well. While I'm a little bit younger than Vincent was, I vividly remember that phase in the early 80s where a few friends whose fathers were working in the car business, their jobs were in jeopardy, that feeling of the town contracting, and indeed some ways in which that was being expressed through a racist animus, mostly in the British context, towards immigrants from India or Pakistan and Sikh communities, those kind of things which are taking place very much in my hometown.

The early 80s were a very difficult and charged time, racially, in Britain. Some of that I'm importing from my own experience in that space, and importing into the US context, or at least using that as a means for myself to empathically enter into that space a little bit. There's also, I think that... The Britishness and the accent is also one of the ways that I think about being able to shake off that anxiety about somebody stereotyping you, somehow knowing you. You can dispel the stereotype. What power do we have to push back against the stereotype?

Peter Ho Davies:

Again, for me, it's a question of luck that people in the US can imagine me one way based on how I might look. But when I open my mouth, and this accent comes out, those preconceptions tend to be exploded easily for me. So easily and comically, for me. I know that there's a moment of luck and a moment of privilege I think for me in many ways. The accent itself is a kind of privileged accent, and so it dispels something without me having to make a larger case.

One of the reasons I wanted to unpack Vincent's story and think that through, particularly from the point of view of the friend who witnesses his death and survives him, is that whole line, that whole conflict springs from an insult. He responds, as one would, pretty negatively to that word. While there's a lot of unpacking that goes on beyond that point of the narrative, the line from that piece that always comes back to me, and the line that I find myself, when I read that piece aloud, it's the one that always still hits me, is the line that you can't say all this [inaudible 00:17:41]. There's a way in which the character, in the course of the piece, is unpacking all the reasons for the violence, all the background, all the heritage. He's analyzing and thinking through, as one would, if one thinks back on a traumatic moment such as in this particular example, giving testimony about it.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

He's looking at it from all the different angles and various ways to explain why it might have happened, how they might have found themselves in these situations. But the horror of it, the tragedy of it, is in the moment you can't say all of this. You can't unpack this moment. And I think this is a writerly anxiety. It's one of the reasons why a lot of us become writers, that most of us, in moments of drama, are tongue-tied, right? So writers feel that especially, and so often we rewrite moments to re-explore them, to say more about them, to dig into them further.

The trivial and common experience of this is that somebody cracks wise at our expense in the schoolyard, we don't have the witty rejoinder on the spot. But we imagine it hours or days or months or years later, and I always think for writers, that's the beginning of our rewriting or revision process. I think all writers have that somewhere deep in their bones.

But there are some moments where you can't explain them, and I think... I'm reminded of that moment. You just can't explain all of this in a moment of extremis, when I think about the moments of extremis that so many members of the African-American community are encountering when they're dealing with the police.

Karen Long:

That's right.

Peter Ho Davies:

It's so hard to get to a point where you can unpack this and explain it. You just can't do it, so you end up in space of inarticulation. Protestors are in that space as well. There is so much in people's hearts, it's hard to express all of those things. I actually think people are doing a pretty good job of it, actually, under the circumstances. But sometimes, direct action, sometimes anger, those things are the way of expressing what has to be expressed.

Karen Long:

That's right. And in community in particular, so it's shoulder-to-shoulder. Some of the explosiveness of that word directed at Vincent Chin, who was adopted, it was a grenade that the assailants didn't even know they had deployed against him and his heart, living with his mother.

Peter Ho Davies:

Right. It's not even a bit of language that we would think of as... it's certainly offensive but not necessarily racially offensive. It strikes, it hits, and I think sometimes it's even the way that these things are deployed, or the tone which they use. I think one of the things I was channeling as I was working my way through that section, which was written in about 2015, I guess. It was one of the last sections written for "The Fortunes." Was a speech I remembered seeing the now-president give back in, I think,

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

maybe even it was earlier, 2012. When he was first flirting with a run, he didn't choose to run against Obama at that point.

He was talking about enforcing tariffs on Chinese imports, and he used that word about the Chinese that would be part of his negotiating strategy. That's how he would tell them, "We're going to raise a 25% tariff on you guys." Now in retrospect, that seems like, sadly, the norm of political discourse, at least as coming from the president. But I remember in 2012 being just shocked that a public figure, somebody thinking about a presidential run, was using language like that towards a nation, towards a people. There's something of that, I think that energy, that feeling of insult, that pervades the story as well.

Karen Long:

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. We now return to the conversation.

Karen Long:

That's so interesting, Peter, because I've been thinking a lot of about the charisma of the bully in that context. Even as I try to think about why women would have ever voted for him, given his most notorious pre-election statement, the eroticization of the bully for Pete's sake.

Peter Ho Davies:

There's also, I think, a kind of... We talk about it, writers talk about it, the idea of speaking truth to power. So that outspokenness that we elevate, I think that the misapprehension here is this idea that the people who speak truth to power are the weak, they use language in response to the powerful. It's when the powerful use language. You're not speaking truth to power, the power is speaking. I think we can confuse those two things, and I think the president has been quite effective in at least campaigning to represent himself, in some strange way, as a voice of the powerless.

Karen Long:

How has your own thinking in the last while been in terms of your work as a professor, and this moment with Black Lives Matter?

Peter Ho Davies:

That's a very good question. I feel like I'm still in the midst of grappling with thinking about my work as a professor in the context of online classrooms and distance learning and how we try, we anticipate a little bit more of that space going forward into the fall and maybe into next year, how do we find ways of compensating for that or reaching out to students or giving them an experience.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

I think there are some ways that I've been working my way through that. The ways I'm thinking currently about what's going on in the streets is two-fold, really. One is to sort of teach into that space with certain texts that I think are important, and connect to texts that I've often taught before that seem to have been effective, but it's just a way enlarging that. One of my former students, an alumni of our program and a wonderful writer is Jesmyn Ward. Anisfield-Wolfer herself very recently, was delighted to see that. I typically teach Jesmyn's work when I teach a contemporary novel class to undergraduates, and I usually teach "Salvage The Bones." It's just a wonderful body of work...

Karen Long:

I love it.

Peter Ho Davies:

... and they respond very powerfully to that book as well. But I've been going back, and I usually refer to her other works when I talk about that book and encourage them, of course, in that realm to read more about it. But going back to a book of hers that I mention but I don't usually assign, which is her edited volume of essays. I think in part in response to the Treyvon Martin shooting, where she's... It's called...

Karen Long:

"Men We Reaped."

Peter Ho Davies:

Well, "Men We Reaped" is the memoir of her brother and many young men that she knew that have passed on.

Karen Long:

Oh, "The Fire Next Time." Or "The Fire This Time."

Peter Ho Davies:

Yeah, which is a follow up and a companion with wonderful essays by African-American writers. I was just reading Claudia Rankine's piece in there as well, but also Jesmyn's pieces as well, the introduction of an essay she has. I'm planning to assign those to the class this year and encourage them to read them and talk about them.

It's things like that that I'm trying to think through, but I think we're also... It's an ongoing conversation for us, but I think academic institutions are also institutions. We are understandably questioning our institutions and their unconscious biases, and sometimes even their conscious biases. It's a space of reflection, and, I hope, of some action in those spaces as well. That'll take time, and I would like to think it could happen rapidly. But I think it's going to be an ongoing thing. But maybe it'll also make sense in

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

that regard because it doesn't feel like that's work that is ever going to end, that it's a conversation that has to continue.

It feels like not something that we go, "Oh, we fixed it this semester. We fixed it this year." We'll just have to keep having the conversation. And that, at least for me, feels like something that I've been trying to lean into a little bit over the last few years, actually. We have a sort of informal seminar here for our students, partly driven by the students, I should say. A lot of what I want to do in this space is just try and listen to them. I feel they have their ear to the ground more than an older guy like I do.

That's been very productive. I think it actually fed into some of the ways I thought about writing about race in "The Fortunes," so those dialogues were helpful to me. But we've sort of convened a group, an informal seminar group. We originally called it Writing Race, we now call it Writing Aware and it's broadened out into a lot of other issues, gendered issues, those kinds of things as well. Those are often uncomfortable conversations, which seems entirely appropriate to me. These ought to be uncomfortable conversations. But at least they're conversations.

I don't claim that they necessarily fix anything, except that I think it's worthwhile to allow people to express those things and it's good to share them, I think, in certain ways as well. I do think they've been productive at times, but it does feel like it's a long and ongoing process, something that we have to think about quite a lot. My colleagues and I are having those conversations, having those conversations with our graduate students at least.

Karen Long:

I like to think that some of those conversations have led to some of the people who are showing up now, with their bodies in the street. That a lot has happened, that many of us didn't think could happen, and much more needs to. It's a beautiful space you hold, because you have your opportunity to be with the minds that will carry forward.

Peter Ho Davies:

Yeah. That, in the best possible way, feels like a real privilege. I'm honored to hear and talk about this, and it feels like a space... I think one of the, rightly enough, reasons we're wary of institutions is because they represent power dynamics. Of course the classroom can represent that, an academic institution can represent that. I think a creative writing workshop, at least my hope for it, is it's a space where peers are gathering. I tend to think of all of my graduate students especially as sort of colleagues in waiting. In many cases, like Jesmyn's, not waiting for very long. Actually they often go on to publish very well fairly rapidly, which is very exciting.

Those conversations feel, I hope, a little less top-down. They feel more communal, I hope. But it does also feel like a privilege to listen to them. I think I'm, in part, trying to learn that there's real value for me

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

in doing that. There's a way in which that engagement really gives back to me as well, and that's another piece of luck for me. But it also feels good to let them tell me about it, talk to me about it, express it for their sake, and indeed, certainly, for mine.

Karen Long:

Tell us about your next book.

Peter Ho Davies:

Well, I have a couple of things that I'm just finishing up. One is a...the one that I'm currently revising is, ironically enough, a non-fiction book, a craft book, on the art of revision. I'm revising a book about revision, which feels like an appropriately meta-fictional exploration. It's pleasurable, it is something of a solace to have work to engage in at a moment like this. I think any work we can get engaged in feels like an act of hope in some ways like this. Of course work like that is also being informed. I think we could argue that, in a strange way, we are at a moment of national revision. We are trying to re-understand what it means to be a country and what it means to be American.

I'm very interested in the ultimate goal of revision not to be one about the polishing of work only, but actually a kind of reevaluation of work, a re-seeing it, a re-vision of it. Which for me as a writer means a kind of re-understanding, a moment where I arrive at a more essential sense of the meaning of the work that I'm engaged in. This feels like a moment like that, where we are re-visioning the country, re-visioning ourselves and our relationship to it. There is a resonance there that's been inspiring, actually, in certain ways as well.

The other book is a novel that is more or less done. I've just worked, I think, through the last set of the galleys for that. That's due to come out in January of next year. I'm probably not going to say too much about that. It's fairly personal, it's a small, short book, one that's close to my heart. We'll see how it goes down. It's an interesting moment for all of us and again, this is part of that humbling moment for all writers. I think anybody with a book, certainly those who have books in progress at this point, and to some degree many of my students who have books coming out at the moment and people like me who have books coming out a little bit further down the line, there's that odd feeling, I think, of being out of step with the times.

Writers, I think, struggle, and have in many other moments, it's true I think, around 9/11 as well, that feeling of being too late, right? That we were not prophetic, we could not see these things coming, couldn't see the pandemic coming, couldn't see 9/11 coming, and that our work bears a timestamp as a result. This was written before that change in that kind of national consciousness moment.

I feel a little bit of that, I think, as well. I wonder about what that's going to mean for the book, but I have to admit, I was just reading today actually, and I can just call it up. I was reading the *Times* today. There's

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

a wonderful poem by poet Jericho Brown. There's a line in there about... The line is, "Save my loves and not my sentences." I do think, and this is a sentiment... I mean, I very quickly read the poem just recently but that line really popped for me. I don't mean to ascribe all the meaning to Jericho's little poem. There's a lot more going on in that. But I feel my friends who are writers, speaking to their books coming out at this moment and obviously getting lost in the shuffle in certain ways, understandably, that that doesn't really matter.

That's part of the humility, which I think is actually a pretty healthy space to be in, and a realistic one, of course, as well. But somehow also allied to that too-latedness that we're feeling, there's also that writerly anxiety of a too-soon fear, right?

Karen Long:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Peter Ho Davies:

... everybody's trying to write about the pandemic, and I'm sure a lot of people are also being really driven to try and write into this moment of protest as well. There's that feeling of are we trying to do it too soon. Of course different genres respond at different rates in various ways. Novelists, I think, where the project might take five or six or seven or eight or 10 years, very much struggle with that too-latedness.

Karen Long:

What is the title of your small and personal novel?

Peter Ho Davies:

"A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself," which is a quote from Anais Nin referring to shame. Shame is the lie that someone told you about yourself. It's a narrative, much about shame and I hope about the humanness of shame. But also about, what I suppose to me feel like the inhumanness or the merciless way in which we desire to shame others. It's an odd moment, because it goes... It's very easy to look at some of what goes on from above politically as, in this moment, shameless, I would say. There's a way in which I'm trying to, at least in a small way, to reclaim shame as a human value, that to be capable of feeling shame might be something and might be better than the alternative, actually, in certain ways as well. Some of those spaces.

But yeah, to that too-soonness. I'm kind of envying and admiring poets like Jericho Brown. I think Claudia Rankine has a poem also in the *Times* today. That capacity to respond more rapidly than I feel I'm able to in prose, in many ways, and of course to do it so beautifully and so poignantly. There are different ways of thinking that through. But it's also space that I'm sure I'll be talking about with my students, right? How do they write into this moment?

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

There are moments, I'm sure, where they're thinking, "What's the point of all of this?" We want to talk a little bit about that, and is it too soon to be writing about, I think, the way this question is being raised with me, at least a month or so ago, within relation to the pandemic. At least in that regard, my answer has been, I think, to think about... It's been noted there's been a relative dearth of fiction that came out of the flu pandemic, the Spanish flu pandemic in 1917 and '18. Maybe because people didn't want to read about it, maybe because the war was just ending so that was filling the consciousness in various ways.

But there's a part of me, although we're talking about "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," that call back into those spaces. There's a part of me that thinks if there had only been more literature of that experience that was in our cultural memory, in the way that I think actually some anti-war literature from World War I has carried forward for us.

Karen Long:

Right, and I've read that there's a sense that part of our amnesia was our shame. Our shame for how all of these people died and the memorization was too hard. I wish I could conjure Jericho Brown into this room because I know he has a lot to say about shame. I know he has a different slant on it.

Peter Ho Davies:

But it does make me wonder, at least from the past, if we can... It's cultural memory, right? So we can write about the pandemic, either then or now, and we won't all do it well by any means. But if one or two of those books survive for 50 years, or 100 years if we're lucky enough, and I suspect we won't be, for that to be the next time we struggle with a global pandemic like this. Maybe that cultural memory helps us. It helps us be prepared, it helps us be prepared culturally, maybe it even helps our leaders be prepared, but certainly it makes the population be prepared in some ways as well.

Karen Long:

That's right. Robert Pinsky was in Cleveland right after 9/11, and he couldn't get to us on a plane. He had to drive, but he kept his obligation. I asked him a little bit about what you're speaking of now and he said, "All the poems of 9/11 are written." I completely missed what he was trying to say, so I asked him to repeat it. He essentially said, "The art we need is there. It is eternal." It was such a comforting idea that we don't have to invent what...the canon, what our ancestors have thought about. We put our flourish on it, but there's a lot there.

Peter Ho Davies:

It's making me think about a text like "The Decameron", for instance, which is such a [inaudible] novel, and sort of thinking about calling back to and unearthing spaces like that. I should just put that on a reading list for the students and hope that they might be able to find something within that that would sort of feed them going forward as well.

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Karen Long:

I need to thank you so much for just diving in on all of the non-trivial stuff. It's one of the joys of your books, Peter, is that they read like ice cream and they stick like gravy.

Peter Ho Davies:

I like that. That's a good blurb, Karen. I appreciate that, and particularly in lockdown when I'm not getting to the gym and I'm probably eating too much. That also makes me think about my waistline going on at this point as well.

Karen Long:

Like being in a long, boring plane flight if we're lucky enough to be sequestered. What do we do on a plane? We eat because we're bored. Well, thank you again.

Peter Ho Davies:

It's been my pleasure. I really appreciate the conversation. I think at times like this, mostly, partly out of our social isolation, but also I think out of a need for a national conversation, any opportunity to talk to another seriously and frankly, I deeply appreciate. So really, thank you for reaching out.

Karen Long:

All right. We will speak again.

Peter Ho Davies:

Absolutely. Thanks so much, Karen. Be well.

Karen Long:

You too. The Asterisk* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby, with help from producers Tara Pringle Jefferson and Jay Williams, of WOVU Radio. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Thank you for listening.