

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long (00:07):

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, figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with poet Natasha Trethewey. Born in Gulfport, Mississippi, she won a Pulitzer in 2007 for "Native Guard," a book of poems that tells the story of a black Louisiana regiment during the Civil War. She served as our nation's Poet Laureate from 2012 through 2014. But she won her Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2021, not for poetry, but for non-fiction -- her book, "Memorial Drive."

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards juror, the British historian Simon Shama describes it as, "intensely poetic, but with an emotional economy that makes the gathering catastrophe even more overwhelming when it unfolds. I also want to stress, her book is a compelling portrait of race in America from the 1960s on. It's a thrilling addition to American literature that will be read for many, many years as a classic, not just of the memoir genre, but any kind of contemporary writing." Natasha Trethewey is a professor of English at Northwestern University. Welcome professor.

Natasha Trethewey (01:51):

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Karen Long (01:53):

Well, one of the things we love to do on the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards podcast is to get out of the way of the writing. And I noticed with pleasure, you did some of the same in "Memorial Drive," putting your mother's voice directly in the book. We'll talk about that, but first I'm hoping you'll read us a passage from "Memorial Drive."

Natasha Trethewey (02:17):

Thank you. I'd love to, and I'm gonna read this short passage that is the very last page of the book.

"Often, when I am alone on the road, I think of traveling back to Mississippi each summer with my mother. The year before I was old enough to drive, she let me practice steering the car on long stretches of empty highway. I'd reach across the center console and take the wheel, leaning into her, my back against her chest, following the arc of the sun west toward home. For several miles we'd drive like that: so close we seemed conjoined, and I could feel her heart beating against me as if I had not one, but two."

Karen Long (03:13):

That is so beautiful. And it's so eternal. We were conjoined with our mothers. So the fact of it lives in that passage. Had you the epigraph in mind as you ended there?

Natasha Trethewey (03:28):

Absolutely. I think the epigraphs were among the first things that I chose for the book including the Shakespeare one, knowing that they would provide some guidance for me. Yeah, so the two I have at the

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beginning, one from John Banville, "The Sea" reads, "The past beats inside me like a second heart." And the second from Martin Buber, "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware."

Karen Long (03:58):

So glorious. And we look when we are ready at the journey to see what we were unaware of.

Natasha Trethewey (04:08):

That's right. And you can only see it with the look backwards.

Karen Long (04:11):

Right. And one of the heartbeats of this story is her bravery and your bravery and your decision to look back. And when I am with people discussing this memoir, the question often arises: How did you manage that? Was there a click?

Natasha Trethewey (04:37):

Well, I knew that I had to do it. Even as my whole writing life up to a certain point, I had never imagined that I would do it. It wasn't something that I felt compelled to do until I began to feel that my mother was being erased. As the significant person she was in making me the writer that I am. And it was happening at the same time that my work was becoming more and more well known, such that people would write about me. And my mother would be included only as backstory and always as "victim" and not given her full humanity as the complex and amazing woman that she was.

Karen Long (05:36):

And so a work of art takes a woman threatened to become a footnote to her daughter and makes a monument. And at the end of "Memorial Drive," is that Stone Mountain monument.

Natasha Trethewey (05:55):

Yes.

Karen Long (05:55):

And it feels so subversively wonderful that this monument will outlive that one, at least in my literary estimation.

Natasha Trethewey (06:05):

I hope that it's, if not literally, but figuratively bigger than that one.

Karen Long (06:11):

Yes. And thank you for that. When you were Poet Laureate, you told a story, I think on Diane Rehm's show. Will you talk to us about that?

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Natasha Trethewey (06:26):

Yes, that was probably the first time that I had actually uttered her name, her full name. And what I was talking about was this was in the aftermath of having won the Pulitzer, a book that when it first came out was dedicated to my mother in memory. And my intention then had been to create a monument as well. But what I realized afterwards, because I hadn't said her name, I hadn't included her name in the book, was that I had created a monument to Natasha Trethewey's mother, not Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough.

And when I was telling that on Diane Rehm's program, there were some people who heard it and they were some of the people from the Mennonite community that I mentioned in the book who had been in Gulfport when my mother was a little girl doing work in the community, having stayed at my grandmother's house. And they heard her name and they said, oh, this must be Gwen's daughter. And they came to see me in my office hours and brought with them a trove of images of my mother in plays, because she, you know, had been at Bluffton University for her freshman year. And she was in plays. They had playbills, photographs, and then they invited me to give the Peace Lecture there, the annual Peace Lecture, exactly 50 years to the season that my mother entered as a freshman. And when I got there, they had a young woman, a student who had done a presentation on my mother who had more information. There was a faculty member who had been one of my mother's teachers who was still there. So it was this way of, I just got so much of my mother back just because I said her name on the radio.

Karen Long (08:33):

And the response that the human she must have been, that 50 years later, that is the response and people are stepping forward to remember and honor her. So wonderful. And geography also winds its way through your literature, but I'm fighting back a sense of Ohio pride -- with Bluffton -- that I managed to hear.

Natasha Trethewey (09:01):

And of course, you know, I've written about them crossing the Ohio River into Cincinnati in order to get married. And so even though I was conceived in Kentucky, born in Mississippi, it was Ohio that made my parents' marriage legal.

Karen Long (09:17):

And that detail about the marriage certificate that your father is listed as Canadian and your mother's listed as colored.

Natasha Trethewey (09:25):

Yes. Both weird things, both weird things. I mean, of course, you know, I think at that moment colored was still one of the polite terms. But Canadian is an erasure (laughs). I mean, it completely ignores the fact that my father was my white parent. And I've often wondered why the clerk who filled it out did that. Was it somehow to protect them from what was considered illegal elsewhere? I'm not sure. Was it something that they didn't want to acknowledge, even though it was legal?

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Karen Long (10:12):

A step aside? Or you are exotic as a Canadian in Cincinnati? It's possible.

Natasha Trethewey (10:18):

Yes. Foreigner. Yeah. <Laugh>.

Karen Long (10:20):

How did history start living and breathing for you? Do you have childhood memories of the past not just being dusty books?

Natasha Trethewey (10:32):

I think, I mean, it's hard for me to completely go back, but I feel like I always had a sense of being a historical being and living within history. My earliest poems were about Martin Luther King Jr. And you know, elegies for him. He'd only been dead a few years I realize now when I first started writing about him. And other African American history, I was always, you know, deeply concerned with it. And I think it probably had something to do with being black and biracial in Mississippi. It seemed impossible to escape it. That it was always not just the moment, but something that was ongoing in American history, you know, including my birth on Confederate Memorial Day. Things I was always sort of aware of. It's hard not to be aware of the Civil War when you grow up in a place like Mississippi.

Karen Long (11:38):

And in a way your body was a text. And you write in "Memorial Drive" that your family provoked hostility. Just moving around in your daily life.

Natasha Trethewey (11:50):

That's right. And I think that also, helped me to understand that this was something that didn't simply belong to us, but it was part of larger patterns of history in culture in America.

Karen Long (12:04):

It feels romantic to me that you married a historian. I can't help it. And is he an early reader of your manuscripts?

Natasha Trethewey (12:14):

Yes, he is the early reader. Yeah. You know, there were times that my father was an early reader of my manuscripts and particularly in poetry because my father was one of my first teachers. But there came a point where I didn't necessarily share my poems with my father anymore. I think it was also the moment that I started to write more about him and have a need to push back against the narrative that at that point seemed like the dominant narrative that my father represented. So Brett did become my earliest reader. And he still is.

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Karen Long (12:51):

Would you give us how he feels sitting with and learning from "Memorial Drive?"

Natasha Trethewey (12:59):

You know, the reason I think that he is such a good reader of mine, both in poetry and prose, is that he knows what I'm looking for in a poem. He knows that, so that if I read something to him in an early draft, if he can see it, then he knows that I'm on the right track. But if he says to me, I can't really see that, I know that I haven't done the work that I'm trying to do for a reader with images. Now he's also someone who has known this story for a very long time. And I think the hardest part of writing it was having to revisit things that I have actively been trying to forget for so long. And so he was there, you know, the whole time that I became immersed in a past that I needed to forget. And there's that epigraph in, later on in the book, which is another one of the ones that I had early on, but didn't yet understand the true impact of it. And it's Joan Didion's "The way you got sideswiped was by going back." I got sideswiped and it was good to have someone who could care for me in those moments of sideswiped going back.

Karen Long (14:36):

I see that. And I'm so glad he was there as a witness and also someone to see you in your surround.

Natasha Trethewey (14:47):

But he's also a good reference, you know, let me not forget to say that if I have a question about, you know, particularly you know, civil rights era stuff, he's knowledgeable and I can go and if I don't have to pick up a book, I can just ask him <laugh>.

Karen Long (15:05):

You mentioned seeing and being able to see, and that feels like a keystone to your work, professor, because in part that passage you read for us is so visual and you talk about how photographs are something you return to, again and again. You have books that draw from the well of painting. Don't know if I have a question in there, but if I do <laugh>, it's about the creation, the movement from the visual medium to the written medium.

Natasha Trethewey (15:43):

I think of all the different kinds of images responding to the five senses, that I am most drawn to the visual image. Because of the way memory works, because I see it. I mean, certainly there are smells and sounds and tastes that bring us back to memory, but even when they do, it's the visual that they evoke for me. And so from my earliest days of trying to write poetry, I was always focused on what I could see. If I could see it in my mind's eye, then I could get it down on the page. And so often it meant thinking about whatever it was I was writing and trying to create a mental photograph of it. And to begin with that image as a way to enter wherever else the poem was going.

Karen Long (16:51):

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One of your decisions in "Memorial Drive" that struck me as essential was your mother's voice. And you have a section of recovering your mom's voice in your grandma's house on an old cassette. And you give us her voice in these transcripts, which are so difficult to read, but also argue against her being one thing. You can feel her intelligence, her weariness. Her exceptional ability to blunt the crazy.

Natasha Trethewey (17:28):

Yes. Right. Yeah, she's just amazingly patient and stoic, but also so determined. You know in her own voice hearing her, that despite what he is threatening, despite what he calls a choice, that isn't a choice, "come back to me or die." She is resolute. She's not going to do it. She is determined, and I think aware, that she will risk dying, but she will do that rather than commit to going back to him. The strength of that is astounding to me. And in my choice to use those recordings, those transcripts I wanted for the reader to hear that, because I was, I knew that I could try to tell you again and again, all those abstract words about how resolute and strong and determined she was, but I wanted you to see it for yourself.

Karen Long (18:42):

And I think daughters are unreliable narrators of their mothers. I certainly just on my rounds with friends will listen with a different ear, as we talk about our moms, as we do endlessly.

Natasha Trethewey (18:55):

Well, I mean, this is so clearly a love story for my mother, a love letter about her, a hagiography, perhaps someone might say. I use that word to acknowledge it in some ways, but I thought, yeah, I want you to see that maybe you think I'm unreliable, but hear it from her in her own words.

Karen Long (19:17):

One of my dear friends once said to me, "Why did we lie on our stomachs through undergraduate in our dorm rooms complaining about our mothers?"

Natasha Trethewey (19:26):

<laughs> Oh gosh, if only I'd had that opportunity. I often thought that there is that moment that I guess women have where you start to become friends with your mother. You go from that slightly adversarial relationship because you're a petulant teenager <laugh> to being friends, seeing her, a mother's full humanity. And I think I was just on the cusp of that. And then I didn't get it.

Karen Long (20:01):

Yes. And perhaps some of the work of "Memorial Drive" is rightsizing between the two of you. There's a detail in the story you saved till the end, which was necessary for this book to exist, of the police officer finding you and Professor Gadsden in the restaurant and mentioning to you that the transcripts would be purged from the trial of your mother's killer. And he gives you a bottle of wine. He says, "You're going to need this." What did you do with that bottle?

Natasha Trethewey (20:40):

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Wow. No one has asked me that. Let me think. You know, I don't know. Because he was obviously giving it to me to drink while reading those files, but I could not go home and read those files. It took me a long time before I finally sat down with them. And I don't know if that bottle of wine was still around when I finally got to sitting down with these...with all the things in the file.

Karen Long (21:19):

It was such a gesture on his part. <Yes> Of reaching to someone he had failed because the transcripts and the totality of the police and court work was that they failed your mom.

Natasha Trethewey (21:36):

Yes. And I think what was meaningful about seeing him, him finding me, was seeing how he had lived with the sadness of that. As long as I had. That his wife says to me that there's not a day that goes by that he doesn't think about my mother.

Karen Long (22:11):

And to know that he traveled with that and traveled with you in this parallel way, does feel like a poem to the humanity of both of you?

Natasha Trethewey (22:26):

Yes. I thought it was...I mean it was very interesting to me and I write about this a little bit, that he told me that he'd seen me in the police station that morning or that afternoon. And he said that I already looked like I was far away from there. And I thought about that so much. And I remember thinking, well, surely it was just that I was in shock. But I wonder if there was something else he saw. And it made me think about what I can't even know about myself in that moment. What decisions I was making about how I was going to carry on.

Karen Long (23:22):

And our shorthand around police isn't kind. We don't imagine them having depth of perception on the job. So I was grateful that he saw you and remembered seeing you.

Natasha Trethewey (23:41):

Yes. And recognized me, you know, I'm just walking down the street.

Karen Long (23:47):

20 years later!

Natasha Trethewey (23:48):

And he wanted to make a connection, but he also wanted to be respectful.

Karen Long (23:54):

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That was a hinge moment, for both of you.

Natasha Trethewey (24:00):

Yeah. And I mean, even just, and the way that it happens, you know, that he, when he asked the question, "Did I just see you guys coming from the Holiday Inn?" Because that was the hotel that was in downtown Decatur. And I said, no, because I wasn't thinking that he had seen us walking past it and we do have to walk past it to get from our house to downtown. So I just said no. And then he said, oh, sorry to bother you. And he went away, but then he sent a round of drinks and you know, my manners told me that if someone does that, I should go and say thank you and introduce myself. Because I did find it curious that the bartender came over and said that he'd sent the round of drinks and to apologize again and somehow, and I think if I hadn't done that...

Karen Long (24:55):

It would've let go.

Natasha Trethewey (24:57):

He would've let go.

Karen Long (25:01):

Yes. Something he was apologizing, but not for mistaking you.

Natasha Trethewey (25:06):

Right. He was apologizing for the intrusion that I think he must have thought he was doing into my life.

Karen Long (25:15):

Right. We're all such interesting tells, you know, we're letting out much more than we think we are.

Natasha Trethewey (25:23):

Yes.

Karen Long (25:23):

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'll now return to the conversation.

Karen Long (25:50):

Have you had a chance to look through the Anisfield-Wolf canon and see how many of your friends are there?

Natasha Trethewey (25:59):

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Yes I have. Including a colleague here, Reginald Gibbons, for a novel of his.

Karen Long (26:05):

So it was really lovely to see that I noticed that Elizabeth Alexander and Kevin Young are people you thank in some of your acknowledgements. That is a great joy to join the living writers together.

Natasha Trethewey (26:21):

It absolutely is. Yes.

Karen Long (26:23):

One of the things that intrigued the community Ursuline College, where you did a reading in the fall -- and thank you for that. I still hear about it from people who participated.

Natasha Trethewey (26:38):

It was really a nice thing to get to do. I felt very connected, even virtually, which is not always the case.

Karen Long (26:46):

One of the women who works at the Cleveland Foundation said to me just this week, how connected she felt in that room. And you had recorded the audiobook yourself for "Memorial Drive." How did you manage to read aloud and why did you make that decision?

Natasha Trethewey (27:16):

Well, when the publisher told me that they wanted to record an audiobook and that they would hire actors to do it, I knew that I had to do it. Mostly because, well, I mean, I think that there's obviously the part of it that, you know, as a poet, my own sort of the way that I hear the rhythm of syntax and that I wanted to be the one to read that. But more importantly, it was about the transcripts and the document that my mother wrote. I could not imagine an actor portraying and capturing her voice nor could I be comfortable with the idea that an actor might perform those transcripts and how they would give voice even to him.

Karen Long (28:25):

Right.

Natasha Trethewey (28:25):

I was worried that instead of just allowing his words to suggest who he was, that there would be something else. I worried about something that might be a racist portrayal. I worried about all sorts of things like that. Like, you know, because my mother was a Southerner, was born in the south. Were they gonna try to put on some crazy Southern accent that was not my mother's accent. I mean, you hear me speaking right now, I guess I sound like a Southerner, but it's very different than other Southern accents. And I want to make sure that it's not the right one.

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Karen Long (29:10):

The artifice was something you could account for, if you did it yourself, you could erase the artifice there.

Natasha Trethewey (29:19):

And I really wanted to read those transcripts as if they were exactly what they were, and the reader would hear them almost as I heard them or read them as just a court stenographers transcription. That would be read, which is why, you know, I just read, you know, "G," "J," "G," "J" just so that it's...

Karen Long (29:44):

It stays flat on the page.

Natasha Trethewey (29:46):

And I read that straight through with no, no retakes, nothing, because I did not want to have to read it more than once.

Karen Long (29:56):

Well, the fact you did, it makes you your mother's daughter among many things. And it makes me think of what Henry Lewis Gates Jr said in the documentary, as he was introducing you and "Memorial Drive" as "clear eyed and heart wrenching." And that clear eyedness is so profound in we're not, we are learning and we are traveling. We're not just weeping.

Natasha Trethewey (30:27):

Yes, that's right. Thank you for that. It's hard for me to talk about my mother without weeping myself but the, oh, I think what, the reason I am my mother's daughter, the things that I take from her, it is that that clear eyedness. You know, sometimes I refer to her sort of matter of factness, her ability to, to go straight for the difficult thing, but with a kind of emotional strength and stability.

Karen Long (31:07):

And elegance, and that is in your poetry. And this seems like a perfect moment to ask for one. May we please hear "Quotidian"?

Natasha Trethewey (31:18):

Oh, I would love to read that. Thank you. The poem has an epigraph from Justice Hugo Black writing in 1964. It reads: "No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined."

Natasha Trethewey (31:49):

Quotidian

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Sometimes she wrote about the weather—
how hot it was, or yet another lightning storm
gone as quick as it came. In the catalog
of her days: a dress she was sewing, car trouble,
pay day, laced with declarations of love
to the man who would become my father—
her body bright with desire, a threshold
I would soon cross into being. Two years
before Loving will make their love
legal, my mother writes about marrying
despite an unjust law; and because it is 1965,
Mississippi in turmoil, she writes about a cross
burned at the church next door, interracial
outing at the beach, and being followed
by police—all of it side by side in her letters’
tidy script. Reading them, I can’t help thinking
how ordinary it seems, injustice—mundane
as a trip to the store for bread. And I know
this is about what has always existed,
side by side, in this country. That summer,
my grandmother brought *The Movement*
home. It tells the story in pictures, and it is
beautiful, my mother wrote, adding, I think
you know the way I am using the word.
On the cover: a black protestor, caught
in a cop’s chokehold, his mouth open to shout
or gasp for air. Inside, pictures I could not bear
to look at as a child: a man tied to a scaffold,
his body burned blacker, the fire still smoldering
beneath him; two boys hanged from a tree
above the smiling white faces of the revelers
turned back toward the camera: a young couple

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holding hands, ordinary as any night out
on a date. Now I think of my mother, in love
and writing love letters, cataloguing her days,
those terrible/beautiful pictures on the table
next to the crocheted lace doily and crystal bowl
my grandmother kept for candy: butterscotch
in cellophane wrappers, bright and shiny as gold.
It is July 20th 1965, two months before my parents
will break the law to be married, and my mother,
who's just turned twenty-one, signs off—her rights
basic as any other citizen's—Have to run, she wrote;
Got to get downtown to register to vote.

Karen Long (35:14):

Thank you. "Quotidian" -- it contains so much. Thank you.

Natasha Trethewey (35:27):

Thank you.

Karen Long (35:27):

And it seems also to line up with some work you're currently pursuing with students.

Natasha Trethewey (35:33):

That's right. I am teaching an undergraduate course here at Northwestern that is in conjunction with the new exhibition that's up at the Block Museum, "A Site of Struggle," which is about American artists' responses to anti-black violence. And as a matter of fact, in the exhibition there is an artist, [Ken] Gonzalez-Day is the last name, who does these erasures. So some of those lynching photographs, even the ones that I talk about that I couldn't look at as a child in that poem, what the artist does is remove the lynched person. And all you see is the crowd. That crowd who was gathered, smiling, holding hands on dates. But what is gone is the body. And so it allows us to focus on the disfigurement of the people who did such things and happily posed for photographs of them.

Karen Long (36:50):

How are your students thinking and responding to this?

Natasha Trethewey (36:57):

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Well, we've spent a lot of time. We spent a long day in the gallery and I think it was really tough for them. Because at the heart of the exhibition, the part that's called "A Red Record," it does show a lot of those difficult photographs, things that were used you know, by the NAACP to try to get laws passed against lynching. They processed it. They have read a lot of poems. They are writing poems. They are looking at, and they're expanding this notion of violence against other groups of people all within or been have then, or beneath the larger umbrella of white supremacy. And so, you know, I have a lot of Asian and Asian American students, for example, who were also bringing to bear in this the kinds of anti-Asian violence that we've seen quite recently. <Right.> Some of the anti-Semitic violence that we seen recently so much, it's an exhibit that even though it's focused on anti-black violence, it allows us to have larger conversations about this kind of violence.

Karen Long (38:22):

What renews you in being proximate to people half your age?

Natasha Trethewey (38:28):

Well, you know, they are at that exciting stage that I remember of myself, if I go back and look at my journals. When I was just starting to try to write poems and figuring out my way in. So being with them, getting to have conversations with people who are as excited about trying to find ways to articulate what must be said in language sends me back to my own attempts with renewed vigor. So I'm very happy about that.

Karen Long (39:03):

I'm glad. What are you reading now?

Natasha Trethewey (39:06):

I just finished reading Percival Everett's novel "The Trees."

Karen Long (39:10):

Oh, talk about lynching.

Natasha Trethewey (39:12):

Yeah. But just, I mean, just an amazing, amazing book. I had to put it down and immediately text him and say, thank you for that book.

Karen Long (39:22):

You're in a text relationship.

Natasha Trethewey (39:25):

Yes. So I'm friends with Percival.

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Karen Long (39:26):

Fabulous.

Natasha Trethewey (39:26):

So yeah, I was, I could have written him in an email, but it just felt immediate. I wanted to send him a note. Oh, I just got Rita's, Rita Dove's "Playlist for the Apocalypse." I mean, she's a perennial favorite of mine. So I'm excited to sit down with that. And I'm in the middle of reading Daisy Hernández's "The Kissing Bug."

Karen Long (39:49):

Phenomenal book. She has elevated something I was in the dark about.

Natasha Trethewey (39:58):

I know. And to be able to combine that so beautifully with a personal narrative, of a family story.

Karen Long (40:05):

Which is something you know about.

Natasha Trethewey (40:07):

Yes. <Laughs>.

Karen Long (40:08):

Oh, that's, that's such a good short list to beckon our listeners. I need to thank you again.

Natasha Trethewey (40:16):

Thank you. It's been really wonderful talking with you.

Karen Long (40:20):

The Asterisk* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby, with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland Public School students, working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, wrote and performed our original score. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Visit Anisfield-Wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award, about previous winners and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.