

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're figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with writer Mary Morris.

Morris was the 2016 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award winner for "The Jazz Palace," a novel set in her hometown of Chicago during the Jazz Age. The story, which went through nearly 20 years of revisions, rejections, and drafts, sings of Prohibition Era Chicago, teeming with clubs and gangsters, experimental music, and new arrivals from the Southern United States and Eastern Europe.

Anisfield-Wolf juror Rita Dove praised this work as a foundational novel that gives context to the racial injustice that still divides Chicago today. Dove called the novel "a nuanced and balanced story of those who rise above difference to produce and celebrate art." Mary Morris still sees music as a uniter. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, and is a professor at Sarah Lawrence College.

A celebrated travel writer and memoirist, her second book was the classic, "Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone." She earned her bachelor's degree from Tufts College and a master's from Columbia University. Welcome, Professor Morris. Welcome.

Mary Morris:

Thank you. Thank you, Karen. Thank you very much for doing this. It's a pleasure to be here.

Karen Long:

It was a pleasure to dive back into "The Jazz Palace." Your beginning is brilliant in several ways. I think where you decide to open, but also the epigraph.

Mary Morris:

Mm-hmm.

Karen Long:

Do you mind just giving us that epigraph?

Mary Morris:

No, I don't at all. And I think I would like to say that this epigraph was something that has been in my head for many, many years before this book came out. It's from James Baldwin's magnificent short story "Sonny's Blues." And Baldwin writes near the end of the story: "For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness."

Karen Long:

Goosebumps.

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Mary Morris:

Yeah.

Karen Long:

Do you have a theory why Baldwin is having a renaissance moment right now?

Mary Morris:

Oh, that's a completely fascinating question. I think that Baldwin was a writer who... I mean, first of all, he self-exiled from this country. He lived in France. He lived in Turkey. He was unable to reconcile this America with his Blackness and his sexuality, and I think those are two things certainly that have given Baldwin a resurgence. I mean, his writing is kind of prescient. I mean, the stories that he wrote, "Notes of a Native Son," the novels, his understanding of what it meant to be a gay Black man in this country before we were really conscious of it, I think he speaks to I think a generation of... Well, he speaks to all of us right now, really. I think it makes perfect sense to me that his work has come back.

Karen Long:

He's a progenitor of so much of our thoughts.

Mary Morris:

Yes. Exactly.

Karen Long:

Another thing I want to draw listeners' attention to is your choice of beginning "The Jazz Palace" in July 1915 with the sinking of the Eastland. Let people know what that was.

Mary Morris:

So, in that July morning, Western Electric had a mandatory picnic for all of its employees, and the idea was that they were going to go on a boat ride and have a picnic and go up the lake. And the Eastland had never been a very well-balanced boat, and thousands and thousands of immigrants came that day, and they rushed onto the boats. And there were three boats there, I believe. It started to rain, and because of the rain, people went below; and the people who were on the top, they started to run from one side of the deck to the other to wave at their relatives. And long story short, the Eastland actually was simply unmoored and because of the unbalance and all the people who had gone below and everything, it turned over on its side and it sank in the Chicago River in 40 feet of water. And there were hundreds of people trapped in the hull. Because they had gone below, they couldn't get out. And my father, who was a boy, was actually walking across the bridge that day and witnessed it.

Karen Long:

He was 13 years old. Unbelievable.

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Mary Morris:

Yeah, he was 13 and he witnessed it. He doesn't do what Benny does. He didn't jump in or anything. I believe that he was on a delivery for my grandfather's hat factory. I think he had a hat factory. But that's all that's kind of autobiographical in that. I mean, my father loved music. He was an amateur musician, so I mean, a lot of Benny grows out of my dad.

Karen Long:

Mm-hmm.

Mary Morris:

But that incident on the Chicago River kind of... I tried many other places to start the book, and yet that was going to be the start of the book. I could not not start it there.

Karen Long:

And you start with the river stinking.

Mary Morris:

Right.

Karen Long:

Which, there's so many smells in your book, and you have noted elsewhere that more people died -- it was the worst river accident in U.S. history, 844 deaths.

Mary Morris:

Yes.

Karen Long:

And yet, I have never read about the Eastland except in your novel.

Mary Morris:

Well, there's a really specific reason. These were working class people. These were immigrants. These were not the Abraham Strauses and all of the elegant, well-to-do people who sailed on the Titanic. These were simple workers. Really the reason for the picnic was that they had worked on the cables that had gotten the transcontinental telephone, the first telephone call that had gone through, they had built the spools and the cable for, so they were giving them this sort of celebratory thing. But these were not people who anyone was going to write a long obituary about. So it was really a class thing. It also wasn't a ship that was touted like the Titanic. It wasn't supposed to be this elegant maiden cruise. But I think it was a lot to do with class. Mainly these were Bohemian families.

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Karen Long:

It's still shocking that what we remember and don't remember turns on a structure that is arbitrary. Right?

Mary Morris:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Karen Long:

And I think that's part of the magic of your book, is you excavate so gorgeously this world. And I don't see your research, but it's everywhere. I know you spent much time in Chicago. We find out that anti-war sentiment caused people to kill dachshunds as an anti-German gesture.

Mary Morris:

Yes. Yes.

Karen Long:

That jazz pianists in New Orleans were called professors. There are so many side lessons in this beautiful book.

Mary Morris:

Right.

Karen Long:

Could you talk a little about how you blended what you knew and loved about the city into "The Jazz Palace"?

Mary Morris:

Well, first of all, not that I don't love all the books I write, but this book was my soul. I mean, this was really... My dad lived to be 103 and he was an amateur musician, and I found even some scribbled notes that he wrote to me where he told me some things about the Mississippi and just music and all of that. And I remember listening to him play the piano. Let's take the dachshunds or those kinds of details. When I'm researching, if I'm bored or I'm not interested, if I'm not immersed, if I don't go just down that well, I know it's not working for me. And, with this material, I had no problem. I mean, I loved doing the jazz research. I studied jazz piano for four years.

Mary Morris:

I believe I told you this. I studied until my teacher asked me if perhaps I could do something else besides try to play the instrument. Perhaps I could just read about it. He felt that I wasn't making any progress. But I wanted to really understand that... Jazz is really complicated to understand, and I think there are

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many misconceptions about it. I mean, for example, the notion that it's all improvised is ridiculous. Yes, there's a lot of freedom within the form, but it's also a very structured, scale-based music. And one of the things I found, Karen, is that even though I don't think I learned a thing about playing music, I feel that what I learned about jazz and how composition is made and how solos get played is what fed the structure for this book. I mean, this book-

Karen Long:

Clearly.

Mary Morris:

... to me, is a piece of jazz.

Karen Long:

It is. And you bring in little sections that you seeded later on. Solo performances become ensemble performances. Several critics have noticed this.

Mary Morris:

Right.

Karen Long:

You have elevated the writing about music, which itself is difficult, to an art form. Would you read us a little bit of that from "The Jazz Palace"?

Mary Morris:

Yeah. And let me just give one anecdote. I have a friend who is a jazz musician. And when I was doing some research, I met with him a few times. And he said, "Look, Mary, I think you're fine as long as you're not writing about a musician." I said, "Well, guess what? I am." He goes, "Well, then you're in a lot of trouble."

Yeah, I mean, the thing I found was: I didn't really know how jazz worked, if that makes any sense. I didn't understand it. I didn't understand, like, how do the musicians know when to come in? So it was just kind of like that, that I just tried to get an understanding of what it was like to be a musician. And the only way I could figure it out was that it was a lot like being a writer. So, Benny's a young man. He's desperate to be a musician and not work in his father's caps factory. And he gets himself a job. He likes to go to this movie house, where everything was player piano, the piano-

Karen Long:

Right.

Mary Morris:

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It was silent films and he would play. And they fired the piano woman there and Benny auditions for the job, and he gets the job as the person there. The name of the theater is the Regency. This is just two paragraphs.

Mary Morris:

On Thursday afternoons, Benny went to the Regency and Peyton screened for him the weekend's film. With a small pad in his lap, Benny sat at the piano, scribbling notes. He jotted down themes for heroes and villains, a lover's disappointment, a victory march. Sadness came in minor chords, a fall down a well with a big downward glissando, a slap became any quick chord. Alone in the theater Benny felt an impending sense, a supplicant before his calling.

Mary Morris:

One night while the movie was on, he looked up and saw that the room was full. Even the balcony, which had been empty, was packed. He was surprised because he hadn't noticed all those people come in and it didn't seem to him that the film was any better than the one before it. But there must have been seventy people crammed into that shabby room. He was halfway through the first film and didn't miss a beat. He became aware of the sounds around him. A lady's gasp, a cough, the shuffling of feet, stockings rubbing together, random thoughts, a kiss in the back row, the memory of a ball game, an argument someone was having in the street, a baby's cry, a trolley passing by. He heard it all. A horn honking, a siren rushing to a fire, someone's loss -- and the whole city and the whole world and the lake against the shore all became a part of the music he played. "This is who I am," he said to himself as he pounded to the keys, never coming up for air. "This is the best I'll ever be."

Mary Morris:

So it's that feeling that the artist has when you've entered the work and you've forgotten the world around you. We can call it being "in the zone" or "the flow." Or it doesn't happen. Or an athlete might feel it. My husband's a runner. He feels it when he runs. And when I can get there in my writing, it's like nothing else in the world. And I wanted to have Benny have that experience.

Karen Long:

Thank you for giving him that, and thank you for giving him a raise because he was so good. I was happy, because there's a lot of unhappiness for him, that occasionally people rewarded his glorious art. I had a classical music friend who told me, as a critic, that music was the hardest thing to write about because of its abstraction. And it interests me that you have the water pressing to the shore as a way to think about these elements that bleed into the music. It's so beautiful.

Mary Morris:

Well, I grew up on that shore. One of the things they say about reggae is that some of the beat... This is pretty dark. But some of the beat of the reggae music comes from the sound that the water made hitting the slave ships as they were in the middle passage, and that that beat, that slapping, got translated into

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music. I mean, I think that music comes from what we hear around us, and for me Lake Michigan has always been music.

Karen Long:

Yeah.

Mary Morris:

Musical.

Karen Long:

It's true.

Mary Morris:

So I don't know if that answers your question. But I will say that writing about music was really, really a challenge in a different way than anything else I've ever tried to write about. I'm doing some research on honeybees now. Just give me honeybees any day. I can do honeybees.

Karen Long:

Well, I'm glad for those years of effort. And though you make a joke about it, it's moving that you stayed with a story you felt you meant to tell; to the point that Nan Talese, who had rejected it a couple of times, finally embraced it and said, "Mary, you've got it now." And part of that was the radical edit to end it where you ended it instead of bringing it forward into the sixties.

Mary Morris:

Right.

Karen Long:

And that kind of amputation is stern stuff for a writer.

Mary Morris:

Well, it's kind of like that love interest that won't go away, right? You think you're done, but you're not done. I tried to walk away from this book innumerable times, and yet I found myself going back and wanting to get it right and struggling to get it right. The first draft of this, Karen, was over 800 pages along. And quite frankly, I loved that book. It was a great, big, sprawling... Anna, who's one of the main characters, had 22 children. They were all named after birds, trees, and semiprecious stones, because Anna was an immigrant and she was looking for words, and she looked in the English dictionary and she found the names of birds and trees and things like that. I loved that book, but I couldn't sell that book. It went out-

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Karen Long:

And Ellen Levine, your agent, loved that book. Marlon James...

Mary Morris:

I am a study in perseverance. Anyone who listens to this, I just want you to know: Please don't give up. Don't be afraid of revising. Don't be afraid of going back. "The Jazz Palace" was initially rejected 17 times, and I told Ellen to stop sending it out and it wasn't working. And she said to me this was the worst thing that ever happened to her professionally at the time. And I got so discouraged. It's like if you can have a lens into your future... And I'm glad I don't and didn't.

But if I could've just seen that it would've worked out and would've worked out in such a way that I would've been at the dog run in the morning and my dog would've escaped after a raccoon and Henry Louis Gates called me while I was trying to chase down my dog to tell me that I had won the Anisfield-Wolf Award and I was like, "This is a joke, right? This can't be where this has taken me." But it did. It was the book that would not go away; and I cut it down and I cut it down, and I finally got it to about 500 pages. And again, Ellen had sent it out I don't know how many times. Nan Talese rejected it three times.

Karen Long:

Wow.

Mary Morris:

Bless her heart. And this was really kind of amazing. So, one summer day, I put the book aside for a long time. I was done, right? It was one of those moments where, "I'm done. I'm not going back. It's finished. Done." And I decided to reread "Ragtime," because that was a book I really loved. And I loved the musicality and I loved the rhythm.

Karen Long:

Yes.

Mary Morris:

And I loved the way he brought in historic figures. It was just a book I loved. It was very formative for me at the time. And I went back and I read it and I thought to myself, "This only happens during the period of ragtime. He doesn't go that far forward." And I woke up, it was about four in the morning, and I went down to my office and I found the draft. I literally dug it out of a drawer. And it was... I guess it was something like 500 pages long. And I found the place on page 275 where Prohibition was overruled, and I got rid of everything after that. I just got rid of it.

Mary Morris:

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And I took that small stack of paper. Like soup, I had rendered it and rendered it to this very small... And I started to work with that. And I worked with it and I brought some material in that I hadn't had before. I took some things out. Again, I think of it as a piece of music, kind of like a Bill Evans composition, where you just hone it down till you get it just till the... And I worked on it for so long that... I'm not saying it's a perfect book by a long shot. I don't know what perfection is. I love the fact the Tahitians say... They have no word for art. Their closest thing for "art" is the phrase that means "I'm doing the best I can."

Karen Long:

Oh.

Mary Morris:

But I did the best I can to get it into the shape. And I called Ellen and I said, "I went back to the book." And there was silence on the phone, and I said, "What should I do?" And she said, "Mary, I always loved that book." And she showed it to Nan, and Nan bought it. I remember I was in Hong Kong. I was about to get on a boat, to go gambling in Macau. All these funny things happen when I'm in very strange places. But I got the text from Ellen that Nan had bought the book, and boy did I have a good time gambling.

Karen Long:

I love that Doctorow was the key partially, with "Ragtime," to unlocking your insight. I also-

Mary Morris:

Books are some of our best teachers, aren't they, Karen?

Karen Long:

Oh, always. Always.

Mary Morris:

Yeah. Yeah.

Karen Long:

And returning to them as a new person teaches us more when it is art.

Mary Morris:

Mm-hmm.

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'll now return to the conversation.

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Karen Long:

I also love thinking about you growing up in Highland Park, Chicago adjacent, born in 1947. It's rural. You're out in the ravines. You're riding horses. You ride up one day and Adlai Stevenson comes out and waves at you. Your father had a storied, long life, but you've had so many interesting intersections.

Mary Morris:

Mm-hmm.

Karen Long:

And part of that feels very key to your travel. I am so grateful for your travel writing. I adored "All the Way to the Tigers." I was upset about the injury that started the book. And only researching now did I realize you hurt your ankle in 2008. Way before I met you. But I experienced you hurting your ankle much more recently.

Mary Morris:

No. No, it was a long time ago. And as the writer Richard Selzer, who's also a doctor, once said, "Every story begins with a wound." So the last thing I wanted to do was have a devastating ankle injury, but I did get, I think, a pretty good memoir out of it. So, yes, I've done these five travel memoirs and each represents a different moment of my life as a solo woman traveler. So in the first one, "Nothing to Declare," I'm a single woman bopping around macho Mexico.

Mary Morris:

And then, in the next one, I'm searching for family roots in Ukraine. Then, I'm a single parent. And then, "The River Queen," I go down the Mississippi after my dad had passed away and my daughter's going off to college. And then, "All the Way to the Tigers," which is kind of later in life, little bit of hubris, little bit of Icarus flying perhaps little too close to the sun there, and having a bad accident that derailed me. But as a friend said, "There's a silver lining to every injury and every thing." And I wouldn't say that's true for everything in the world, especially right now, but I do think... I love that book.

Karen Long:

I do, too.

Mary Morris:

Yeah.

Karen Long:

You took something that looked like it could be surface-y and you dived. And one of my questions, because you include some of your art and photography, echoes back to Susan Sontag's "On Photography." And in that book, she wrote, "One could either live one's life or document it," which is

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such a haunting idea considering our immersion with our cell phones and constant image-making. But I wonder: There's Mary and she has spent a book and three years working toward proximity to a tiger; and instead of just being, she takes a picture. Talk about that.

Mary Morris:

Well, I'm really kind of gobsmacked here by the Susan Sontag quote, because I think that's really, really fascinating. And I think it's what every writer kind of struggles with a little bit. Yes, I want to live the moment and be in the moment, and my daughter's always saying to me, "Mom, put the camera down and just blah, blah, blah," or do we want to document it? I mean, I have about 75 journals in which I have done nothing but document my life, and not to mention photography and painting and all of that. In fact, I'm having a new studio built for myself right now to kind of accommodate all this in the house, which is really super exciting for me.

Karen Long:

So you are, for the reader at least, at the apex with the apex predator, and you make a decision to bifurcate and document.

Mary Morris:

I needed a picture.

Karen Long:

See, we need the people who document. We always love the relative who remembers that.

Mary Morris:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, how do I say this? I moved to Mexico in the seventies, late seventies, to study photojournalism, and so I have kind of a degree... Not a degree. I can't call it a degree. But I have a certificate from the Instituto Allende in photography and photojournalism and all that. And I thought that would be maybe more my direction, but then stories and words and all that took me over. I don't know. I mean, I think about my mother.

Mary Morris:

I always go back to this moment with my mother when she was invited to this Suppressed Desire Ball, and she made herself a costume of the world because she'd wanted to travel. And the sentence that's in "Nothing to Declare" is, "Instead of seeing the world, my mother became it." And I think I've always felt that pull between action and observation. The desire to travel and be an adventurer and have experiences, and at the same time, the desire to sit in a quiet corner and write about it all. So, it's a kind of tension in me, I have to say; and I know the Sontag quote articulated in a way that has got me thinking quite a bit actually.

Karen Long:

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One of the things that got me thinking as I reread "The Jazz Palace"... There's so much there. I'm so pleased for a second reading. You have theft of music as a through line with Napoleon Hill, who is a cornet and trumpet player, a genius at the music, who keeps it in his head. And theft and appropriation is part of our cultural conversation. I personally think legitimately because we're built on the theft of people and then the theft of those people's property and labor. So, how do you think about the unifying aspects of music and the exploitative aspects when the people with more power make the money?

Mary Morris:

That is one of the great paradoxes of music, especially for musicians of color; just as it has been for athletes.

Karen Long:

Right.

Mary Morris:

Right? And it's been very fascinating to me in Chicago because... Well, if you take the example of Louis Armstrong, right? I mean, one of the greatest musicians who ever lived, whose manager was his manager for over 40 years. Louis, at one point, comments that his manager never had him over. Never had him to his house for lunch. They didn't even live that far from each other, I think, in the boroughs, in Queens or something.

Karen Long:

Right.

Mary Morris:

But he was never invited to his house. Yet, he managed his career and his money and all that for over 40 years. The exploitation of the African American musician is legend. And the whole question of stealing, because what would happen in these Chicago clubs, and we are talking... When you think of clubs, these are real funky holes in the wall most of them. I mean, some of them are glitzy and fancy and strobe balls and all of that. And there are definitely those like the Duke Ellington places. But there are also these little funky clubs where great musicians would play in what was called The Stroll in the south side of Chicago. And musicians Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, these very accomplished white musicians would go into these clubs and they would steal arrangements from African American musicians and make their own versions of it.

Mary Morris:

And it really, really angered the African American musicians, but I've never heard of the reverse happening. Well, first of all, Blacks couldn't get into white clubs, so that wasn't going to happen. And this whole thing of the Black and tans, which were basically Black musicians where white people could go. There were clubs that were only white musicians and only white people, and then there were Black and

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tans that were basically Black musicians and primarily white guests; although some of them were integrated. My dad would tell me that sometimes it would be a mix of Black and white, but that mainly that was a Black and tan. So people would go and they would appropriate, just as we appropriated all the other things from people of color. This was just another appropriation.

Karen Long:

And how does that sit with you, Mary, on your rounds? What do you think that you and I, as white women, need to be humble about and learn that we might not have known 30 years ago?

Mary Morris:

Well, you and I started this conversation with the word humility. Honestly, Karen, this is going to sound so hokey, but I just think kindness and seeing the other... One of the things that I have tried to do as a teacher, as a parent, as a friend, all of it, is I always love the notion of "say my name."

Karen Long:

Mm-hmm.

Mary Morris:

Learn someone's name. Remember who they are. See them. See people. Because so often, we make people... They're our Uber driver. There's some function. There's some transactional relationship. And I think getting away from the transactional and getting into the more... I always try to ask someone, just in the simplest of ways, how their day is.

Karen Long:

Mm-hmm.

Mary Morris:

James Joyce once said, "I never met a bore." And I have found that I always want to ask people things about their lives and especially in New York City, if you're in a cab, I mean, everyone has a story.

Karen Long:

Sure.

Mary Morris:

It may be complete fantasy, but everyone has a story. And I just try to listen to people. Simone Weil, the French philosopher, once said that attention is the greatest form of generosity.

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Karen Long:

And I feel that flow in your art. Your characters have such depth and your attention to them has a real Anisfield-Wolfian pace. And it surprised me that when you won in 2016, you said from the stage that you were thinking about writing a story. You were thinking about the context of the story and what it could mean for how we understand each other. So here you did this thing in the service of storytelling, which is what the James Baldwin quotation is about.

Mary Morris:

I mean, when Baldwin says "it's the only light in all this darkness," he's saying that if we don't tell our stories, if we don't share our stories, we'll never understand each other. Without getting into where we are right now in the world, if people could, in just a very simple way, find a way of listening... I have a very Pollyanna view of all of this, so I'm probably not the best person to ask, but I do think that Simone Weil quote about attention being the greatest form of generosity, that if you acknowledge the other as not just as someone there to serve you, then it's a different... Right? I mean, I had a lot of trouble... I mean, I don't know how much time we have, but when I was writing "The Jazz Palace"... Napoleon Hill, who is the African American trumpeter who comes up from the South and meets Benny and they befriend each other. When I was working on the book, I did not have an African American character in the book in the first while.

Karen Long:

Wow.

Mary Morris:

I didn't think I had the right to write it. "Who am I to tell that story?" And then, as I got more into this book, I thought to myself, "I cannot not tell that story." I couldn't write about Chicago in the Jazz Age from just white people's point of view. It just wasn't going to work.

Karen Long:

Well, it wouldn't be the book you got.

Mary Morris:

But I don't know if I could write this book the same way now. It's something that writers think about, and we don't have to necessarily go into that. But the climate has changed and shifted, but at that moment, I felt that I... And I'm so glad that I did. Because actually he's my favorite character, I have to say. I mean, out of all the characters, I loved writing him. In a lot of ways, I think he's closer to me than any of the other characters, in some ways. He's a little confused. He's a little chaotic and distracted, but he's got a big, good heart.

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Karen Long:

Yes.

Mary Morris:

And I love him for all that. He's a great musician.

Karen Long:

And you gave him a complicated sex life, which I also enjoyed. There's a lot more sex in this than I remembered. That is at the center of jazz, pulsing life, and you delivered that, too. Say a little bit more though, Mary, about what feels a little dated or a little dangerous, or a little naïve, as you look at "The Jazz Palace" now, if any of those adjectives apply?

Mary Morris:

Karen, again, it's not an easy thing to talk about, but I will say that I think if I were... Look, I know writers who I really respect and admire who have had to put books aside because they involved people of color. White writers who were basically told those were not their stories to tell or not that they couldn't write on certain themes. There's language where Napoleon calls Benny an "oafy," which is a term that Blacks use for white people. There are terms of whites use for Black people. Now I never use certain language, but by the same token, honestly, I think I would've had to tread it much lighter if I were publishing this book now and I don't think it would've been nearly as good. I didn't have that in my head, that little worry thing there. I just cared about the characters.

Karen Long:

Right. You stayed close to the ground-

Mary Morris:

Right.

Karen Long:

... and you did your best.

Mary Morris:

Right. Right.

Karen Long:

And you created a piece of art that -- I saw you gave a book talk in 2020 in Florida -- that continues to matter to readers. So thank you.

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Mary Morris:

Thank you, Karen. I really appreciate it. And thank you for all your work. I mean, it's incredible.

Karen Long:

Tell us, before we sign off, a little bit about what you're reading now, Mary Morris.

Mary Morris:

Well, I'm extremely excited to say that I'm reading the new Anthony Marra. I think it's called, I'm very bad about this, but "Mercury Pictures Presents."

Karen Long:

Right.

Mary Morris:

And I am a huge fan of his work thanks in extremely large part to the Anisfield-Wolf Foundation, and you. Because when I got the prize, I decided to go down the list and read as many of your recent... I would just go through and read, and I think "A Constellation of Vital Phenomena" was the first or second book I read, and I just was absolutely blown away and I've gone on to read his other work. So, I'm really loving that. He's just a spectacular writer.

Karen Long:

He is. And he's so humble, too, about everything he accomplishes. He says about "A Constellation of Vital Phenomena," readers will forgive you almost everything if you stick the landing. And I don't know if you remember the ending, Mary, but it is one of the best endings of any book I've ever read.

Mary Morris:

So, I'm going to have to go back after our conversation and revisit the ending, but there are many things I remember about that book that just ripped my heart out. So, that is an incredible book. I'm working on a novel set in Italy during World War II, so I'm doing a lot of reading of Natalia Ginzburg and Elena Ferrante. A lot of Italian writers. Italian research. I have started the new Dan Chaon novel, but I'm not very far in that. And I've been reading Julia Phillips's "Disappearing Earth."

Mary Morris:

I'm on sabbatical, so I've been trying to get caught up on books that friends have said... I have a list of things that friends have said, "Have you read this? Have you read that?" And I have some wonderful writers like Joan Silver and Carolyn Ferrell and Dani Shapiro. These are some of my friends who just say to me, "Have you read? Have you read?" I have a long list of that. But the thing I'm most excited about is reading the new Tony Marra book. Yeah. Which is coming out on Tuesday, August 2nd.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long:

Excited to be with you and to have your wisdom back in the room, so to speak, and be able to look forward to your next book.

Mary Morris:

Thank you, Karen. Thank you. Thank you for all that you do, really.

Karen Long:

Oh. I like to tell people I hold the coats of giants. It's a nice job.

Karen Long:

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.