**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 return to figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge, with the indispensable novelist, **Peter Ho Davies**, who spoke to The Asterisk\* in its first season.

Born in Coventry, England to Welsh and Chinese parents, Davies won a 2017 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for The Fortunes. His latest novel, A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself, tackles the decision to have or not have a child. It is a stunning portrait of family life and parenting molded by the axes of abortion and autism.

Anisfield-Wolf juror Joyce Carol Oates said of The Fortunes, "It is a prophetic work with passages of surpassing beauty, in which historic figures come to an astonishingly vivid, visceral life." These qualities are one reason Case Western Reserve University made The Fortunes its common read for the 2022-23 academic year. Professor Davies now sits down with The Asterisk\* in person the day after giving the convocation at Case Western Reserve. Welcome, Peter.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

It's great to be here with you, Karen. Very nice to be here in person as well, actually.

**Karen Long**

We are a bit giddy about that because we were hunched over laptops in June of 2020.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

It's funny. I think of, when you're talking about The Asterisk\*, I sort of think a little bit about how the last couple of years feel like they always have had an asterisk attached to them. People say, "How are you doing?" And I've been lucky, thankfully, to be able to say, "I'm doing okay." But it always feels like asterisk, "under the circumstances."

**Karen Long**

Right. And also under the surface, not okay.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. Yeah.

**Karen Long**

We left up our conversation, interestingly, a couple years ago talking about the lack of pandemic literature from the 1913 flu epidemic. Do you have an inkling about whether it'll be different this round?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I do actually. It's funny, I was talking to some of the students here at Case Western yesterday about what might draw me to, say, write historical fiction in the context of The Fortunes. I was leaning back into that idea that novelists talked a lot about in the wake of 9/11, in a narrow, self-interested novelistic way about that, how difficult it was for people in the middle of books, say, set in New York or set in a contemporary moment, when the book might be in progress, something world-changing like 9/11 comes along. How does the book engage with that, deal with that in various ways? So, there's that feeling. I think James Wood, the critic, had this great line about how it's very easy to become very dated very fast now. One of the responses, I think, amongst some novelists was to move to the safer ground of historical fiction in which you know the events, they're not going to change on you in the middle of writing it.

But the other response, I think, is to move into the future to project a little bit because some of these novelist's anxieties have come back for writers in the midst of books, and during the pandemic, everything has been upended. How do you work that into your book? Do you work it into your book? I suspect that that same move, maybe it's even more common now than it was in the past, to throw a little bit into the future is one that I see. I see it amongst a lot of contemporary writers. I envy them being able to do it. I see some of my students thinking into that space as well.

I think that's a space where we'll see shadows of the pandemic. I'm sure there'll be some books that deal with it directly in its lived experience, but I think there's also a strain of post or mid-apocalyptic fiction that looks into those territories, whether it's this pandemic or the next pandemic or the next other upending experience that we go through as a nation or in a global sense. I think that is going to be in the fiction. I think people are going to try and bake in the upheavals that we go through.

**Karen Long**

I've also been thinking about the way the pandemic has been a case study of the power of the narrative, that it has been life or death, which narrative it subscribed to. The New York Times had a fascinating story about the Australian approach to the pandemic built around something called mateship, the way Australians call each other "mate," and doing some comparisons about the different communities in Australia putting their elders first, especially the Indigenous communities, and had the United States managed to extract the political extremes the way the Australians purposely did, there might have been a savings of 900,000 American lives.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. It's really interesting. It does feel... There are competing narratives, competing political narratives. I used to think a little bit about... We were talking a little bit about the aftermath of 9/11, and of course in that aftermath, a sort of patriotic upswell and that feeling of it's patriotic to go through security at the airport, be patient with that process, do all those kind of things. I think most people embrace the need for doing that as a mode of safety for each other along the way. Obviously, there was some excesses to that, some difficulties with certain kinds of screening and profiling. But it feels as though the way we might've responded to the wearing of masks could equally have been undertaken as a patriotic effort to protect each other from a threat that we were engaging. Yet that narrative, although I think some certainly pursued that, was pushed back on by some of the very people who'd proposed the more patriotic narrative about going through screening for flights. So, it's interesting how over the span of about 20 years, those narratives shifted and were shifted by people in the political sphere, essentially.

**Karen Long**

Right. When we think of The Fortunes and it's new longevity, you were funny to say that required reading makes a novel 20% less interesting.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Sure.

**Karen Long**

But it also is an imprimatur from some very smart people that this text is a teaching text. How are you midwifing that?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Well, it's funny. I joke with my own undergraduates when I assign contemporary novels... I teach a class called The Very Contemporary Novel. We look at books just over the last five or 10 years. It's really exciting and exciting for them because I sort of say, well, the critical opinion of these books are still out to some degree, the verdict to posterity, you are the verdict for posterity of these books. If you remember any of them 50 years from now, that means that that book is really successful. So, it sort of empowers them to think into that space. But I warn them about that sense that's sort of a reflexive response. I called it an unconscious bias yesterday, by which anytime we have a book assigned to us, that we're made to read something, we resist it a little bit. I think it seems more like a chore than a pleasure we've chosen for ourselves. So, I'm sort of conscious of that.

I think novelists, we hope to entertain, different forms of entertainment, to be sure, but we hope to entertain. So, that idea that that might be reduced by the sense of obligation or assignment, I think, is something that concerns me and it concerns me for my peers whose novels I'm teaching. I want to spare you that, I think, in some ways.

And yet, as a teacher, one of the great pleasures I have teaching that class is there are a few books. It's a class in which I get to encounter lots of new books. I often assign a book that's just published that semester to read. So, the students know I haven't even yet read it in some instances. It's really exciting to do that. But I also love those books when I read them and I go, "I want to teach this. I want to hear what the students say. I want to discuss it with them." And particularly, then, those books that I feel as though, "Oh, I've taught that once before; I can teach it again. I know I can teach it again after that," that excitement of there's so much to plumb here. So, I love books and novels that are teachable, discussable. To have this book be a book that gets assigned in classes and teachers talk about the students talk about with teachers, it's just a real thrill, I think.

**Karen Long**

And its capaciousness, you have described The Fortunes as a book about the hyphen and the multitude of identities that we all carry, and an invitation to the reader to think about the Chinese American identity. One of your points last night was, as Abraham Lincoln made the Transcontinental Railroad possible, did not live to see it, it was immigrants, Irish and Chinese, that knit the nation back together physically, and there is something there for us now.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. I hope so. I mean, of course there's a lot of... I would like to call it loose talk, but it's probably more just dismaying talk about civil war that's in the air now culturally, I hope only metaphorically. You think back to that earlier stage where the country was, again, almost torn apart and the railroad linking east and west in this sense. The visual image in the novel is the sense of, we think about railroad tracks, we think about a child drawing them in a rudimentary way. They kind of look like stitches. It's like something suturing the nation back together again, some great massive undertaking and a difficult undertaking. Those workers, the Irish working from the east, the Chinese working from the west on the Central Pacific, those are incredibly difficult circumstances. They're literally engaged in an act of nation-building, even though most of them are not citizens of the nation that they're building, I think, in certain ways.

But I think every immigrant group can point to ways in which they've contributed to the nation. I think what's notable about the Irish and the Chinese in that particular phase, as I mentioned last night, is they were pitted against each other literally in the race to build across the country. The Great Race as it was known at the time. But they also compete for jobs after the building of the transcontinental. The Irish are very antagonistic toward the Chinese. They're part of the movement to drive out the Chinese. So, you can feel that there are ways in which immigrant groups are pitted against each other.

But as I mentioned, one of the joys of the book, in a personal sense, is that last section about adoption from China is inspired but not really based on the experience of a former roommate of mine who's a Irish immigrant to the US and her adoption of a daughter from China. So, I talked a little bit about that sense in which it's a small but genuine sort of delight to see a small degree in the bend of that great arc or long arc of history coming around.

**Karen Long**

Mm-hmm. It's also wonderful to bring to young minds the fact of the people in each of the four sections. They have a foot in history and a foot in imagination. Did you see them together in your original idea? I know you thought you were going to write a novel just of the first character.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

That's right. I was very excited about that material, about the transcontinental. My enthusiasm for it goes back, oh, 25 years now. I was a relatively recent arrival in the US and I took the train all the way from Boston to San Francisco, which was eye-opening, I think, for a European. Coming from Britain, coming from Europe, even the way we conceive of what a country is is different to thinking about a country on a continental scale. I think sitting in a train seat for four or five days, which is not the most comfortable thing. I couldn't afford a cabin or a berth to sleep in; you feel it in your bones, that scale. And maybe because I was so desperate to get off the train by the time I was coming over the Sierras and coming down to San Francisco, but also the views are amazing. I remember being in the scenic car, watching that landscape go by. But also hearing, at that point, and I think reading, too, about the Chinese who built the railroads. It goes back to that.

So, that material was really rich and interesting to me. I was really drawn, even, to the idea that here are the Chinese building from one side of the country towards the middle; here are the Irish, sort of my Celtic brethren as my father is Welsh, building from the other side. This sort of meeting of identity groups that I could relate to felt really suggestive to me. So, I thought there was a scale there for a whole novel. It's down to that primary character in that first section, Ah Ling, the historical figure who's sort of footnoted in the history. He's that great gift to the historical novelist. You can open him up, I think, in various ways. It's less about he's an object of somebody else's inspiration, Charles Crocker's in this regard, who looks at his manservant Ling and says, "Oh, the Chinese, they could help build my railroad."

But then I think he, as I've talked about, he as a character understandably feels both pride at...he's the first member of the model minority, in a strange way, problematic as that terminology is. But then on the back of his inspiration, tens of thousands of his countrymen are hired into backbreaking, dangerous, exploitatively low-paid labor. So, he makes a decision, ultimately, as a character that he wants to step off the stage. He no longer wanted to represent, he no longer wanted to be part of history, and that feels right for him. But it took me a long time to recognize that. I kept pushing back and pushing back on him because I only had maybe the first third or quarter of the book at that point. So, that required a reconceptualization.

That's when I began to think about the echoes of his struggles with issues of representation echoing with Anna May Wong and her role in Hollywood, echoing a little bit with the tragic story of Vincent Chin and how he becomes kind of a representative, I think, in various ways, and on into my own struggles of representation as a writer writing into these spaces.

I think what I recognize in retrospect is that every novel I've written has had one of those moments where, well, to borrow a metaphor, it has gone off the rails. It's gone off the tracks, where there's had to be a moment of reconceptualization in the middle of the book. Actually, I've talked a lot about this with students, that you need to have a plan in it, an idea of where you're going, but you also need to be open to the possibility of that destination is not where you're going to end up and that you have to sort of reroute in the middle of the text, in some ways. That, I think, is part of the revisionary process. Sometimes we go so far with the text, realize this is not working. We go back to the beginning and start over and find a new way forward. Sometimes in the middle of the journey, we say to ourselves, "Oh, okay, I like what I have, but it's not going to carry me the whole distance. What comes next?" And that's often that moment of reconceptualization.

But I say to the students by way of how do you recognize this in other people's books? Well, I say, "Well, when it says part two, that probably means to writer realized that what was going on at part one wasn't going to carry them the whole distance." So, part two often starts at a different time, different character, different place, different point of view. That's the signal of that reconceptualization in the middle of the book.

**Karen Long**

How did Anna May Wong arrive then?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Oh, I'd been aware of her story for a while. She's not somebody who loomed very large in my consciousness, but I've always been interested in sort of film and representation. There are some early stories in my first book that touch upon that in various ways. I am a great lover of film, not good film, not cinema, but movies I'm a great fan of.

It was trivial, although at the time it was very exciting and fun, I worked for a little while in Singapore and publishing, just for about six months or so. But while I was out there, I was an extra, and then what they call talent in a couple of commercials. They were honestly commercials for the Australian market, and they were shot in Singapore, and at least one of those places, it was on a kind of street of Singapore and architecture that they figured they could dress to look like Paris. So, this strange idea of us all emotionally being in Paris on the Singaporean street that had been dressed up to look like a French street. It was just that little glimmer of, to use the cliche, the magic of cinema, but also the transformative powers, how malleable is representation, is what it is.

So, I think in a weird fantasy, I was like, well, if I'd stayed out there, maybe I'd have got a little bit more work in that line. So, I've always sort of been interested in figures like Anna May who sort of step much more fully, much more fully, of course, into pleasure. I've tried to write about movies and being an extra in other contexts. Maybe that was something that primed the pumps of the story, resonated with me.

**Karen Long**

You gave a charming anecdote last night about the assigned reading may have shown up for this contemporary class on their SAT.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Well, yeah. I think I could tell this story now because that SAT is far in the past, and in fact, I have subsequently bought the results. My son, who's a freshman as well, so same year as this entry class at Case Western, and he's not here, he's elsewhere; he took the SAT about 18 months ago, as they did, and he opened it to the reading test and found a passage from The Fortunes. That was the first question on the test. I was a pain to point out to the undergraduate Case Western last night that he didn't have a particular advantage because he had also not read the book at that point, despite it being dedicated to him.

We joke about this, about the things you can't put in fiction, the things you can't make up because nobody would believe them. And I think that's in that space, you just cannot make this kind of stuff up.

**Karen Long**

No, it's too delicious. Did you say that you bought the results?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I did. You can go online and you can buy old tests, I think, if you're studying for the SAT. But also in his case, you pay not just to see your score, but you can pay to see how you did on particular questions. I did get him to buy this, and that's how I know, I think he scored 8 out of 10 on that section, which I think is pretty respectable. I mean, when I was reading the questions, I'm not sure that I'd have got 10 out of 10 on it, actually. It's tricky because I feel like I know the whole book, and so my answers would've been shaped by the context, whereas I think the questions are keyed into the particular passage in certain ways.

**Karen Long**

What did the test takers want to know?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Oh, it's a comprehension test, essentially. It's multiple choice as well. It's very odd to see one's work sort of formalized in that way.

**Karen Long**

Boiled down into ABCD.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. I was sort of honored. It's sort of nice. I've been in exams where those kind of passages show up. Although I was talking to my friend Charles Baxter, I think, also in the past has had a passage from a book on an SAT or another exam. He said, well, one of the things about that is that we're just obscure enough that we can be on the test without them feeling that anybody else has read that particular passage. So, it's maybe a backhanded kind of compliment. But again, that feeling of being a teacher, loving having my books taught by others, it's a little pleasurable. It's a little...

**Karen Long**

I'd say more than a little.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**

So you're the Charles Baxter professor?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I am.

**Karen Long**

You're named for a living person.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I am named for a living person. One of the pleasures, I'm what they call a distinguished collegiate professor at Michigan. One of the great pleasures, maybe the greatest pleasure of those designations is that you get to choose who you name your professorship after. Charlie has been a great mentor and a great friend. He was at Michigan when I first arrived. First person who welcomed it. I think he met me at the airport when I flew in for my interview. We've remained in touch regularly over the years. Even though we only overlapped in Michigan for a couple of years, he and a number of others really sort of set a tone for the program, how to shape a culture, which I think I and many of my subsequent colleagues have tried to continue. So, it felt like a way of acknowledging that, I think, in many ways.

He's written much about Michigan. He's a very strong Ann Arbor figure. The Feast of Love is very much an Ann Arbor novel. So, it all felt right in those terms.

The funny thing is, and this is another one of those you-can't-make-this-up story: Charlie had mentioned to me years ago that, like me, he has some Welsh roots far back in the day. At some point, in the last few years, he was over there visiting some family members he knew in Wales and mentioned me to them. It seems as though we are actually related. So, it feels strangely nepotistic now to have named my professorship after...

**Karen Long**

Or uncanny.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. I think related by marriage, if not by blood.

**Karen Long**

Wow. It's been such a important program in the culture of the United States. So many important writers have come through your auspices.

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.

I was intrigued to read that Kurt Vonnegut was a gateway drug for you.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Oh, yeah. Absolutely. A gateway drug is one of the ways I like to think about that. As a teenager, maybe even this is part of that early fascination with film, I was a big science fiction fan, loved Doctor Who, loved Star Wars. I always joke about how back then in Britain, movies like Star Wars would come out in the US and we would have to wait another six months for them to show up in British cinemas. The novelizations would always precede them across the Atlantic. So, I read Star Wars before I saw it, those kind of things, and read a lot of terrible... Actually, that one's not a bad one, but otherwise bad novelizations of movies and shows. So, I read a lot of science fiction. I think got into even how special effects were done, so that's part of the insider interest in movie-making, I think, a little bit.

But I came across a book years ago, probably when I was 13 or 14, called Who Writes Science Fiction. I think in the US its publisher's DreamMaker. It's a book of Paris Review style interviews by a writer called Charles Platt with science fiction writers, golden era writers from Azimov, Bradbury onwards. Vonnegut is in there. I'd read some of those guys. I loved all the interviews, and I just started reading other people. And that's sort of led me to Vonnegut. I think Vonnegut does represent a really transitional space between science fiction and moving into literary fiction. Once you read Slaughterhouse-Five, you're only a step away from, I don't know, let's say The Naked and the Dead, for instance, or Catch-22. And once you're into those spaces, you're not that far removed from Hemingway's work and then from there on, to Fitzgerald. So, the progression is quite easy and some of these stepping-stones have then carried me forward in those ways. I still have an affection, particularly for Vonnegut's work. I think I learned a lot from it as a writer.

**Karen Long**

Well, speaking of carrying forward, let's turn our attention to your most recent book. Let's begin by you reading to us from it.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Funnily enough, having just mentioned working my way from Vonnegut through to Hemingway, this is a little passage that's taking a bit of a shot at him. But he can take it, I think. And it's told that the father in this book is a college teacher and he and his wife, although they now have a son, have previous to that successful pregnancy, had an abortion after getting very catastrophic genetic testing on a previous pregnancy.

At the father's college comes today to teach Hemingway's Hills Like White Elephants, the abortion story that never mentions the word abortion. It's a classic, a staple, a textbook example of subtext. He's been dreading it. Half the class misses it, always. Their reactions when it's explained to them range from a penny dropping, "Oh!" To grudging resistance. "Sure. That could be what they're talking about, I guess."

He looks around their faces, the faces of those who get it, searching them this time not for critical acumen, but experience recognition. But he also resists the story. Its discretion seems perversely coy. Why shouldn't it use the word? Why, for that matter, should the most famous fiction about abortion be written by a man? He imagines a revision in which the redacted word is reinserted in every line of the dialogue, with a young woman leans across the cafe table and says, "What are you talking about? Oh, you mean the abortion?" Where the waiter asks, "Anything to drink with your abortion?" The bartender winks, "Abortion, huh? Tell me about it." Where the other passengers, waiting reasonably for the train, stare out at the landscape of chorus, "Why those hills do look just like pregnant bellies."

Fuck subtext. Screw subtlety. The story normalizes shame. He recalls a similar technique being used in the '80s for stories about AIDS, stories that didn't mention the name of the disease. He doesn't teach those stories anymore, and he thinks if he did, his students would wonder, WTF? He makes a mental note to stop teaching Hills Like White Elephants, to stop perpetuating the unspeakableness, to replace it with Alice Walker's The Abortion, or Anne Sexton's The Abortion or something, anything by Grace Paley, said to have started writing stories while recuperating from, you guessed it, her abortion.

**Karen Long**

Wow. Thank you. That centers on the biblical importance of naming.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. Naming and speaking the unspeakable, I think. And the power of silence and the power of taboo and the oppressive power, I think, sometimes in those silences.

**Karen Long**

And here, you're taking a jab at your narrator, who is also a man writing about abortion.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. Inevitably, I was self-conscious about that, tentative about it. We rightly think of it as a women's issue. It's one of the ways we talk about it politically, of course. But as a man who's gone through this with my wife and my family, I know that I benefit from Roe versus Wade, that there are many men who do.

I think one of the reasons I wanted to speak into this space a little bit is that there are plenty of men, many of them in-all male legislatures around the country, who don't hesitate to speak about abortion on the other side of the debate. It feels as though men on my side of it, I think, maybe out of discretion, out of wanting to allow women to speak in that space, tend not to. This is not to speak for women; it's to speak as an ally, I think, in some ways. But it does feel important that, particularly at this particular juncture, that we all speak, that we all talk into this space, that we recognize this is a national issue, a human issue, not simply a woman's issue.

**Karen Long**

Right at the beginning, the mother in A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself says, "Abortion has been legal all my life. Why do I feel like a criminal?"

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. It's one of the things I was talking about last night with respect to The Fortunes, how writers wish for some longevity to their work, continuing relevance. So six years after The Fortunes comes out, it's a book about the history of the Chinese in America. It talks about the Vincent Chin hate crime slaying in 1980 Detroit that I wrote as historical fiction. Yet in the current climate of anti-Asian hate, it feels incredibly and, as I think I said, queasily kind of relevant and prescient. One of the things I think about with that line from A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself is that it's of the past. I'm pretty sure my wife said something very much like that probably the best part of 20 years ago. And it's now becoming literally true. For all that any writer wants their work to be relevant into the future, I would very much wish that were not the case in this particular instance. It's sort of horrifying to be in that place, that our worst fears are being realized in some instances.

**Karen Long**

As your reader, though, it's her presence that makes this bearable for me and her permission early.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

That is true to who she is in reality. I think the character is fictionalized, but I think that spirit is drawn from life. I think also, to be fair, she gets the best lines, which is one of the things I wanted to try and do.

**Karen Long**

Well, the way the intimacy, which this is such an intimate story of your lives together and your resentments and that incredible phrase "of cheerio squalor," the moment where the successful birth begins with you driving home at 20 miles an hour, the father-figure, "solemn speed of a funeral cortege." I mean, we all did that. The ability for the reader to travel with you is supported by the dailiness of the details you've noticed.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. The book is in this kind of weird dance and negotiation between normality, the recognizable, and the unspoken. Some of these details of parental life are some ways universal; they're very recognizable. We've all gone through them. They're a little mundane. But it's also nice to recognize some aspects of those things on the page, I hope, for readers. We talk happily and publicly about parenting. I wanted to counter that in the context of a narrative where these parents are also people who've lost a pregnancy, who terminated a pregnancy before that point, which feels less spoken about, less typical, although given the statistics, many women who've had abortions will go on to have children; many women who have an abortion have already had children. So, in fact, those statistics would suggest that these dual narratives are actually incredibly common, in many ways, but a little less spoken about, I think, in the culture. So, it's an effort to sort of think about, I'm just like you, and yet here's a thing that we don't talk about us all having in common.

**Karen Long**

The book is an invitation for me to think about what our world could be if we did speak about it. The title is one of the keys. It comes from Anaïs Nin, right?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**

Who said, "A lie someone told you about yourself is a definition of shame."

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. It's funny because as a writer, I'm fascinated by shame, guilt. I find that a great spring for character. It's actually literally, it's coiled within us, often, that finds later expression in various ways. But there's a part of me that feels as though... I think I'm caught. I think I talk about this in the book. I'm caught between a moment in this political, historical time when there's a little too much shamelessness out there. We might want for a little bit more probity, for people to be a bit more ashamed in some instances. And yet, sometimes those very same people are keen to use shame as a weapon against others.

I think I have, and not everybody should have, and all part of those who don't, I have conflicted feelings about what we went through. My wife does as well. But we were trying to start a family. We wanted to be pregnant. We wanted to have a child. To have to then make that decision is very difficult under those particular circumstances. So, do I feel some shame about that? I do. But I'm not going to let other people weaponize that shame against me. That's my feeling. To weaponize that against me for political purposes feels... Well, I probably shouldn't say how that makes me feel on a podcast.

But I'm not going to be shamed by people who say, after the latest school shooting, "Let's have more guns in schools." I'm not going to be shamed by people who don't believe in climate change because you don't care about the future of children on the planet. I'm not going to be shamed by people who resist changes to healthcare that will support mothers and children. Those people don't care about children. I'm not going to be told how to feel about what I've done about my child or about that pregnancy by those people.

**Karen Long**

And where does your shame live now that you've written?

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I think one of the things about writing a book... I resist writing as therapy, and yet somehow several of the books I've written, this is true of The Fortunes, somewhat true of this book, healing is too strong a word, but they provide a kind of relief. Again, there's something coiled that is expressed through the course of the book. You share a shame or what feels like that. It feels like confession, that intimacy we're talking about. The act of people reading that and responding to that can feel like an act of forgiveness.

I want to be careful. I don't think abortion is shameful. I don't think it requires forgiveness. I'm speaking very much for my own feelings and experiences and emotions under very particular circumstance. Every abortion story, as I say in the book, is different. Everybody has a different abortion, same with everybody has a different child.

But I think, and maybe this is the broader context of writing in general, I talked a little bit last night about writing as an act of hope. We write from the past into the future. But reading's also an act of hope. Both writer and reader are reaching across a void, a divide. You don't know me. We're not typically sitting in the same room together. I may be writing from a different time, a different place, a different culture, a different gender, a different class, all those gaps that separate us, and we struggle with all the things that separate us in our culture at the moment. The act of reading and writing is an effort to bridge that gap. So, any time that dialogue is responded to, feels like an act of fellowship. Maybe that's more important, even, than this question of forgiveness. It's just recognition.

**Karen Long**

The word coming to me is enlargement.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. I like that.

**Karen Long**

Say it. Nobody died. It is a release to say the word and to realize there's something behind and after it that can contain the things we need it to contain.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I think we think through things through language. We understand them through language. We process them through language. So, to not be able to speak of them means that we are somehow stuck in a loop. We can't process because we haven't spoken of, haven't shared, haven't talked about, haven't written about it. I think for me, maybe it's that question that I was able to work through some of this in the process of writing a book.

**Karen Long**

And for me as the reader, Peter, to take the hardest things, which include grappling with neuro-atypicalness in a loved one, which so many of us have, and think together, to speak together and lift it into art, to have the pleasure of the art accompanying what would otherwise just be therapy, is the transformational moment that you bring to us. So, thank you.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

I appreciate you saying that.

**Karen Long**

Tell us what you're reading now.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

That's a good question. Well, on this topic, because I've been thinking into it politically as well lately, I read Jennifer Haigh's Mercy Street, a book that also touches on abortion. It seems engrossing. It's wonderfully written, really smart, really thoughtful as well. I appreciated that.

There's also a wonderful anthology edited by Shelly Oria, published by McSweeney's. It's called I Know What's Best for You, which memoirs about abortion experiences. I'm not in it, but I've blurbed it. I think it's a really interesting, really powerful text.

**Karen Long**

Starting with that title.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Right, exactly. I recommend that to folks as well. More recently, I'm right in the middle now... It's a different kind of text, but deeply enjoyable. Anthony Marra's Mercury Pictures Presents is a new novel that's just come out. And Anthony was a Anisfield-Wolf winner?

**Karen Long**

Yes. For A Constellation of Vital Phenomena.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah. That's right. I know him a little bit. I was actually just emailing with him about the book. We were talking about the Anna May Wong section of The Fortunes. Tony's book is set in Hollywood of the late '30s and into the '40s, mostly about European emigres working in Hollywood, although there is also an Asian American actor character in the book as well. He gives a little shout-out to The Fortunes in the acknowledgements. It's just delightful to be back in that milieu. It's an incredibly well-written, beautifully researched... I'm actually envying the research as I'm reading. "I should've done more research." But he's done a beautiful job pursuing that, and it's just a really moving book as well.

**Karen Long**

He is a protege of kindness and words.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Yeah.

**Karen Long**

I'm so happy the two of you are keeping company, and we are so happy to have had your company again. You're our first repeat, and we'll do a three-peat somewhere down the road.

**Peter Ho Davies**:

Well, I appreciate that. It's always a pleasure talking to you, Karen.

**Karen Long**

Thank you, Peter.

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.