

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 author **Ishmael Reed**. Born 85 years ago in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Professor Reed won the 2022 Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Prize for his six decades as a poet, novelist, playwright, lyricist, cartoonist, musician, and founder of small presses and publications, doing it all with curiosity, bite, and a global reach.

Celebrated as a teacher and for writing such groundbreaking novels as Mumbo Jumbo, Professor Reed was recognized in 1998 with a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant. Last year he dropped a jazz solo album, *The Hands of God*, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His most recent play, *The Conductor*, premiered in New York City this spring. Colson Whitehead once said, "Some folks dream about being in Harlem during the twenties. I'm sad I didn't get to hang out in the late sixties Berkeley with Ishmael Reed." Reed lives and works in Oakland with Carla Blank, his wife and collaborator of more than 50 years. Their daughter, Tennessee, is a poet and managing editor of the magazine, *Konch*. Welcome, Professor Reed, welcome.

Ishmael Reed:

Thank you very much, Karen, for the nice introduction.

Karen Long:

I'm excited to have you, of course. And I'm excited to hear some new work, a poem that was published just recently in the *Alta Journal* called "Yesterday's Newsreel Was Chasing Me." Do you mind reading that?

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I certainly will.

I dreamt that yesterday's
newsreel was chasing me.

It had the head of a Pathé screen

It was on roller skates and

Gaining on me

My feet hurt

I had shortness of breath

The white rooster they used as a logo was on the newsreel's shoulder, crowing its head off and angrily flapping its wings.

And if that were not enough they

Were playing that hot, scratchy combative music

The newsreel's theme.

Pathé was projecting images ahead

of me

I almost ran into one

Bob Hope was telling jokes

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to the troops.
Mussolini and his mistress
Clara Petacci
hanging upside down.
FDR at Yalta.
De Gaulle and the GIs entering Paris.
Schoolchildren hiding
under their desks.
Rita Hayworth, her hands on her
Knees a pinup
Pasted on "Flying Tigers,"
her real name, Margarita Cansino.
Hirohito was on horseback.
Some uncouth baseball fan was handing Jackie
Robinson a black cat.
Robinson, who assaulted army officers
for using the N-word
petted the cat
"Buy Liberty Bonds"
Rosie the Riveter
her sleeves rolled up
But just as the Pathé
was breathing down
my neck
It passed me by.
It was after somebody else.
I wondered who
and I wondered why.

Karen Long:

Thank you. Wow. In the intro to this, you mentioned that you saw newsreel of Mussolini when you were six years old, and since his party is making a comeback in Italy, this poem came around and it made me remember that at the end of Mumbo Jumbo, you described time as a pendulum, not a river. More akin to what goes around, comes around. Is that idea in this poem?

Ishmael Reed:

I think so, and I think that it's also an instruction to the younger generation that World War II was more than the war that Elvis bought in. There's really a dearth of a historical understanding, especially when it comes to American history. So that's one of the points of my work, is to remind the public and the readers of different aspects of American history, aspects that have been ignored. And I think this is that... Also, it uses a lot of pop images, but it's contrast to some serious topics. So I mix up the...

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Karen Long:

Yes, the tones.

Ishmael Reed:

Historical weight, weighty historical topics, and I think that always helps.

Karen Long:

There is that beautifully cinematic quality. I feel like I'm watching a newsreel when you write, Hirohito was on horseback, some uncouth baseball fan was handing Jackie Robinson a black cat. I'm right there with you. And I'm wondering if you're also asking your listener, your reader, to think about if anything has changed.

Ishmael Reed:

That's true. I think that the past is probably contemporary, and this is another idea that a number of writers deal with, including a writer that Carla Blank has had a lot to do to revive. He received an Anisfield-Wolf Award, William Demby.

Karen Long:

Yes. And you published one of his books.

Ishmael Reed:

I published two of his books. And as a result of Carla Blank and Melanie Sherazi, there's a renaissance going on of William Demby, but that's one of the big tributes that was paid to him, Anisfield-Wolf at a time when most readers and critics have forgotten about him.

Karen Long:

Well, there's another thread that this poem brings me toward, which is one of the winners for 2023. The historian Matthew Delmont wrote this book called Half American, about the more than 1 million black people who served in the Second World War to reclaim some of that history. And the title he explains on the very first page comes from a 26 year old at the time of Pearl Harbor's bombing was working in a cafeteria in Wichita, Kansas. And he wrote the newspaper in Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh Courier, which was then the largest newspaper. And he asked, should I sacrifice my life to live half American? Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow? Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life, is the kind of America I know worth defending?

Ishmael Reed:

Yes. Well, that was a question facing the returning of GIs at World War II. They were shortchanged in the GI Bill. As a matter of fact, it was called the White GI Bill, and this meant millions in assets that were lost.

Karen Long:

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Yes. And we're living with the consequences of that racism baked in.

Ishmael Reed:

Absolutely. The deprivation of assets is a big part of American history that we ignore and it's still going on. Chris Matthews, he said that his father received a GI Bill and that enabled him to send his kids to college. So the million blacks who fought in that war, who were deprived of the GI Bills, didn't have the opportunity to apply those assets to sending their children to higher education.

Karen Long:

As I've watched and read your thoughts, Professor Reed, you seem to have a complicated relationship to money. One example might be that when you won, I love that you're both laughing, the MacArthur Grant, you distributed it in the name of art there in San Francisco and more broadly to support some plays. Talk about your relationship to money.

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I decided if I ever received a large award that many people will benefit. So first, Carmen Moore and I did an opera called Gethsemane Park. Black theater is vanishing. And a matter of fact, the audiences are dwindling and because of the pandemic, it's gotten even worse. And I've written about the situation in Berkeley where one of the oldest black theaters, Black Repertory Group is in trouble and might have to shut down. And this is happening all over the country. So I spent thousands of dollars in black theater efforts both here and in New York. And Carla Blank has really been a big help in this because she's directed some of these plays and also been assistant director, and as a matter of fact, co-producer.

So I was commissioned by the San Francisco Opera Company to write a libretto for a very well-known musician, composer. And that didn't work out. I'll leave it at that. I think maybe the book was a little too wild for them because I took liberties with the... They asked me to write a book or a libretto based upon the arrest of Jesus Christ and the garden of Gethsemane. So I took some liberties. As a matter of fact, Lazarus mother complains about him coming back about who's going to take care of him. She's sort of like a feminist, who's going to take care of these men they brought? And then the late Calvin Butts, Reverend Butts, he said, well, I had trouble with the book, but I liked the music. But he said it gave him some thought. The idea that why would Lazarus want to return?

Karen Long:

That's the question.

Ishmael Reed:

Mundane things when you've seen paradise. There are a lot of things that you don't necessarily find in the actual traditional text. That wasn't the reason it was turned down. I think the composer couldn't come up with the music. And so the rights reverted to me, and I hired Carmen Moore, the great New York composer who was just admitted to the academy, the American Academy, and he came up with an excellent score within three months. We call it a gospera, because we hired both gospel singers and

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opera singers and who were the divas. I mean, the gospel singer was hard to get. And this thing was a very popular, what I call a populous people's opera.

We hired people who were really off the streets somewhere on training, and it premiered in Berkeley, the Berkeley Black Rep, and then it traveled to New York and played in New York and also San Francisco. We're trying to get funding, given the kind of treatment it deserves. But I financed that and I've been financing black theater since the MacArthur Award. I couldn't do it without Carla. Carla's doing a new play. Well, you mentioned the play, *The Conductor*. *The Conductor's* returning this month at the theater for the new city in New York on First Avenue, and she's going to direct that play and undergoing rehearsals by Zoom so far.

Karen Long:

What happens in a play that doesn't happen in a novel for you?

Ishmael Reed:

Theater I've found to probably be one of the most difficult of the arts because there's so many variables and we're experiencing that now. For example, some of the actors are in other plays and we have to sort of adjust their time and rehearsals to that, just unpredictable things happen. I've been writing these novels, I think will take a little vacation and write some plays. And she said, well, you don't know what you're getting into. So my first play, the leading lady collapsed on stage and had to be rushed to the hospital.

Karen Long:

No bueno.

Ishmael Reed:

And then the director was arrested for gun possession and narcotics. What happened was, these guys are from Texas and Louisiana, so they insisted upon using real guns. And so the director got into an altercation with a policeman, they found the guns and then he had the stage money and the police said, well, this stage money is just... This money is so you can deceive another. So everything was a mess that first play. So I really learned since then, that theater's difficult. It's very difficult.

Karen Long:

What was that first play?

Ishmael Reed:

It was called *Hubba City*, and it was about the crack epidemic in Oakland.

Karen Long:

So you have a deep relationship with Oakland. I don't get a sense you would move off your street, is that correct?

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Ishmael Reed:

Well, I think that's probably correct. Although this is not the same neighborhood it was say 10 years ago because it's been regentrified. Before that it was maybe 90, what? 98% black this neighborhood was. I think at first we had a difficult time blending in because I think they figured we were just some upper bohemians or something like that. But when the crack epidemic broke out, our family took the leadership and stabilizing the neighborhood and discouraging this kind of behavior. And as a matter of fact, my daughter and I, Tennessee, we got one of the crack houses torn down. It took us two years.

Karen Long:

Good on you.

Ishmael Reed:

But I have a photo... I wrote about the neighborhood in two installments in Alta magazine, which is produced by Willie Hearst III, and that's where the poem appeared. And I talk about the neighborhood in those two articles.

Karen Long:

As I think about your creative collaboration, it's longevity, it's beauty. I just want to ask the human question of what makes a good marriage?

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I think we're both artists, I think to begin with, and we've been collaborating since around 1965. We did a show called Black, which was the idea of the late Aldo Tambellini, the great Italian artist. And that was at the Bridge Theater on St. Mark's Place. And we've been in collaboration since. And Carla's background comes in handy of course, she's a master of theater of arts. As a matter of fact, she was partly responsible for the rise of Pakistani theater. There was a student in my class named Wajahat Ali. He disappeared for three weeks because of the 9/11. When he returned, he thought I was going to suspend him from the class. I said, no, I don't want you to do short stories. I want you to respond to the propaganda that's coming from the corporate media by writing a play. And I told him he should write a play about a family.

And I gave him Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and that great play by Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night. I said, these are family situations and you should write about a Pakistani-American family living in the neighborhood you guys lived. So he came up with The Domestic Crusaders. He wrote 20 pages. He thought that was the end. So after that I said, we're not finished with you. I said, I want you to write a full length play. He said, well, I don't know anything about writing old plays. So I put him under the tutelage of Carla and they worked... Was it two years, Carla?

Carla Blank:

Yeah.

Ishmael Reed:

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They worked on the play for two years.

Carla Blank:

2003 to 2005.

Ishmael Reed:

They worked on the play. And started out at a restaurant in Fremont, California where was the deal you buy a meal and you get...

Carla Blank:

The only way they could convince people to come was to feed them.

Ishmael Reed:

400 people showed up. People never seen the theater or play before. So traveled from there to the Berkeley Rep to New York and finally at the Kennedy Center. And since then it's been performed in London and was it Toronto?

Carla Blank:

Yeah, Lincoln Center.

Ishmael Reed:

Center.

Carla Blank:

Yeah. The last performance that I was involved in was 2011, but it was published by McSweeney's. And I think it's been done a lot in college campuses since then.

Karen Long:

Yes. Well, that doesn't satisfy my curiosity about how a marriage is made.

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I think the collaboration is very important. So Carla is a classically trained violinist. So she came in handy when we did two albums. I got a cancer diagnosis in 2005 or something like that. And I said, before I check out here, I want to play bebop. And so we put out a CD called For All We Know, it's still being circulated and reviewed. And we were lucky to get David Murray and some of the top musicians that Carla played violin. And then we did... I started studying jazz piano at the age of 60 under women. Susan [inaudible] at first, and then the great Mary Watkins second, she's like a drill sergeant. I said, oh no, is that woman coming today? No, I mean, she's barking orders at me.

Carla Blank:

That's not what would make a good marriage.

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Ishmael Reed:

Mary Watkins was very good. But I mean, I learned a lot from Mary. And so I was able to... I played around the world, Budapest, Lagos, all kinds of places. And so we put that album up, For All We Know. And then Grace Wales Bonner flew me to London to play behind her fashion show, and that's where the name Hands of Grace comes from, the CD that the Reading Group produced. And Carla's on that one too. And one of the big hits of that CD is the Elegy for Lucille Clifton, who was a friend of mine in Buffalo, New York. I introduced her to Langston Hughes, for his first publication. They just dedicated a monument to her in downtown Buffalo.

Karen Long:

Yes, so glad. We need more monuments like that.

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.

So I'm going to think just alongside you that the collaboration, as you say is key. The chemistry has to be there. But also, I was thinking about something that happened when you were in Cleveland, Professor Reed, when you invited the young poet from the ceremony to publish her poem in your magazine. And of all the years we've had a young poet, she's been received or he's been received as someone talented and becoming. But you greeted Kite Lin as someone who could be received as a poet now. It was a difference and it was a solemnity and a beauty in seeing her that I haven't observed in other circumstances. And as I read about your life, so many people have been in your orbit and thrived. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ishmael Reed:

Yeah, I just got a note from Brynn Saito who was teaching at a college here in California. And she told me... A very nice note. I published her when she was an undergraduate.

Karen Long:

Wow.

Ishmael Reed:

And then we put her column... And I put her From Totems to Hip-Hop an anthology of poets. And Helen Vidler noticed her poem and we printed her and the rest is history. So she's had about two or three books out, books of poetry out and was featured in Vogue Magazine. And so when I became a member of the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley, I came as an anthologist and as an editor that was looking for talent. And so a number of us people who are well-known now, we first published when they were students like Mona Simpson, we first published her and she's now a publisher for Paris Review.

Karen Long:

Yes, she is.

Ishmael Reed:

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And Terry McMillan, we published her when she was a student. So there are a number of major writers whom we published either through the student anthologies that we did every class or our magazines, Yardbird, Quill magazines. The late Al Young and I used to edit. Now I don't know whether I told you this, but Viet [Thanh Nhuyen], our colleague who wrote The Sympathizer.

Karen Long:

Yes.

Ishmael Reed:

He gave us a real thumbs up with that poem. I think you should tell her that.

Karen Long:

I will tell her that.

Ishmael Reed:

Pulitzer Prize winner.

Karen Long:

Yes.

Ishmael Reed:

Love that poem.

Karen Long:

And so you had the vehicle and you had the intentionality. Is there something else in the formula that allows this talent?

Ishmael Reed:

I think when I arrived in New York in my early twenties, I really thought I was all that. People had told me... When I became an anthologist, it occurred to me that talent was common. It's a very humbling situation after you read maybe a thousand or so manuscripts or more than that, you'll find that... I mean, the whole idea of who becomes a diva or divos is arbitrary. That there's a lot of talent out there, which makes you come down a few notches to know that. I think some of those who've been anointed as tokens maybe don't realize that, but if they did an anthology...

And it came to a point where some of the professors couldn't distinguish between a student poem and a poem written by a well canonized poet. I went to the National Council of Teachers of English, and I read a poem by a student, and I had read a poem by a canonized poet. I asked which one's which, 50% said the canonized poet was a student. So it's all very arbitrary. So I think when you learn that, you realize that you're very lucky to get whatever recognition you can get in your lifetime, which William Demby did not receive.

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Karen Long:

Right.

Ishmael Reed:

I mean, in the notes about him, they keep referring to Anisfield-Wolf Awards as maybe his only recognition at the time. And he died without getting his final novel published. Carla and Melanie published that book. We all published that book. But he ran had into trouble with Love Story Black and his great work, The Catacombs is out of print, but because of their efforts, there's a sort of renewed interest in his work. There was a conference in Italy, in Rome where people came from different parts of the world to talk about Demby. And I'm finishing a book. That deadline is Monday as a matter of fact about Demby.

Karen Long:

Good. That is good for our listeners to know. So just three years ago, UC Berkeley named you the Emeritus Professor of the Year, and Jeffrey Knapp called you "enormously charismatic and effective as a teacher." What makes an effective teacher? What's happening in the classroom that we have endless conversations about your students?

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I think Mona Simpson said that... She talked about being in my class. She said everybody improved. And I think when you do it, as long as I have been writing since high school, even if you start out dumb, you know a few things. So I'm able to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of different writers and some of them very serious. And as I was talking about Brynn Saito, who wrote this marvelous poem that Helen Vidler picked up, so you never know who's watching you.

Karen Long:

You at one point said, "I think I have a pugnacious style. My style is not pretty. I don't use words like amber or opaque." And I'm not buying that because even in Mumbo Jumbo, you're using panache and picaresque. What are you trying to tell us?

Ishmael Reed:

We trying to be like tough guys because if you come from certain ethnic groups, and this is not just black, but others, people who work with their hands... Very suspicious when you see a guy reading poetry and stuff like that. So I think we overdid it and we all influenced by Malcolm X and Chester Himes because that was a generation where they really said what was on their minds. Chester Himes said... Who lived in this house. He lived here one summer, 1981. He said, to say the unsayable and to think the unthinkable. And so that's why my work looks provocative. And we tried to write about contemporary events. As a matter of fact, this new play, Carla and I are calling it A Living Newspaper, reviving this form that was used by the WPA in 1930s.

And shut down by the conservatives. It addressed the current events of the day. For example, I keep changing the script to align with what's happening in the news. And so for example, I've deleted some things from the last version and added some updates like what happened at Harvard University.

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affirmative action, excuse me, was although the Chinese students who testified at the hearing said they were perfectly satisfied with affirmative action and they weren't against it. But people with money, certain foundations put up stooges or pawns, which the Asian-American writers were quite aware of. And after the decision came down, I was expecting the offended Chinese-American students to take the... No, what happened was they got Ed Blum.

Karen Long:

Yes, you wrote about that recently. What a joke.

Ishmael Reed:

The fifth white man to play, Charlie Chan. But anyway, I was able to get the views of Chinese-American scholars. First I published it in El País. Sometimes my op-eds are not welcome here, so I get them published in Haaretz or El País [inaudible] in Paris. And so I was able to quote Jeff Chang, who wrote a book called, Who We Be. He writes about hip hop. And he had a totally different viewpoint than Ed Blum had about it. He said that it was a put up job and that Asian-Americans didn't have much input on what happened with that decision. Matter of fact, when they had the hearings, the Chinese students who were invited to the hearings supported affirmative action.

It was like a put up job. It was like this anti-woke hysteria and this whole thing that's happening across the country. And that's what The Conductor is about. And so Carla and I continued to do research on some of the hidden contributors to this anti-woke hysteria, and they turned out to be high-tech billionaires and people like... That's what happened in San Francisco. You had right-wing, high-tech billionaires behind the recall. Although if you look at the New York Times, you would think that San Francisco was like the Summer of Love. It's like a big old Haight-Ashbury. It's so dated. Black people had to leave San Francisco because of the high rents.

Karen Long:

Right. As you and Carla research, Professor Reed, one question that keeps recurring to me is you create a lot of media and information, but what sources do you trust? You are so skeptical of so much of the narrative out there. So where do you research and how do you know to trust it?

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I've had my first work in Politico. I trust Politico. As a matter of fact, the senior editor there is a former student of mine we published. So the students pay you back. Theresa Wiltz has a position at Politico, and I published her when she was Dartmouth as anthology. And so I went to... See this information is so available that I'm surprised that more of the pundits of the people who hired opinion makers don't use it. I went to the Harvard Crimson, which reveal the money behind the affirmative action thing at Harvard, and they said it was former [Clarenece] Thomas clerks were on it.

Karen Long:

Right. Student journalism is having a moment.

Ishmael Reed:

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Absolutely. So the information's out there. It's not hard to find.

Karen Long:

One of the things I love is your poem that you wrote February 22, 1973. The Author Reflects on his 35th Birthday. And it fits in our conversation because it has to do... It's funny, but it also is asking us to think about the attitude we carry in the world. And you are talking to the number 35 that you have reached and you write:

35? Make me Tennessee mean
Cobra mean
Cuckoo mean
Injun mean
Dracula mean
Beethovenian-brows mean
Miles Davis mean
Don't-offer-assistance-when
Quicksand-is-tugging-some-poor
Dope-under-mean
Pawnbroker mean
Pharaoh mean
That's it, 35
Make me Pharaoh mean
Mean as can be
Mean as the dickens
Meaner than mean

...

And 35?
Don't let me trust anybody
Over Reed but
Just in case
Put a tail on that
Negro too

Ishmael Reed:

That's a real beauty of a paranoid poem. When I read that poem, I was 35. A woman 65, she said, where you get 65?

Karen Long:

So answer her question, now that you're 85, what do you see?

Ishmael Reed:

I think that poem came about as a result of trying to flourish someone's talents. And it took me a long time to learn that people just want to remain miserable and are really against their development and

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their potential. That's human nature. But that was an important lesson for me to learn, that you can't coach people into goodness or greatness or to become excellent. You cannot coach people into that because a lot of people are not farsighted and really against themselves. So that was very important. So that was a reaction. Let me laugh my head off with Moby Dick as we reminisce about them suckers who went down with the Pequod, that's my favorite line.

Karen Long:

It's another great line in that poem. Recommend it to everyone. What books are you recommending to people?

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I read mostly nonfiction. I'm reading mostly nonfiction. I'd read a lot of history I think. Right now I'm finishing this book about William Demby. So that led me to read about the Cherokee Nation and what happens when you try to acculturate or assimilate or try to play by the rules. They learned English and they became Christians and gave up their culture and religion and what happened as they were deported, they were massacred, their lands were stolen. So that's one of the current books I'm reading. I also wrote the introduction to the new Library of America... John A. Williams, The Man Who Cried I Am. I've been reading about World War II and the situation of the Buffalo soldiers, the black soldiers in Italy. And matter of fact, this poem is a result of that reading, Yesterday's Newsreel Was Chasing Me.

Karen Long:

Good to know.

Ishmael Reed:

Whole campaign there in Italy. Both of us are looking at some of the actors in this movement to change the American curriculum and incorporating that into play. So that's a lot of reading because people don't realize that this is a nationwide effort. To change the curriculum and to suppress Latino, Black and Asian-American studies. And we haven't even begun to look at the treatment of the Chinese, for example, in California. That's a horrible story. But I guess they have enough on their hands with us. They see us as ringleaders. I mean, we're really the mystery makers of America according to some of the columnists and some of the commentary in that...

What happened at Harvard will diminish the enrollment of both Latino ethnic group and Blacks, but these single Blacks out because we're the ones who are putting everybody else up to mischief. So for example, with the Black Arts Movement, many different ethnic groups, members of those ethnic groups began writing and began writing about their own traditions and cultures. And they will tell you that, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, will tell you that they got their start by reading black arts stuff. That was revolt against the Anglo studies where... And we were very much influenced by the Irish.

Karen Long:

Yes, you liked Yeats bringing the Celtic bits back.

Ishmael Reed:

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Yeah. We're very much influenced by... I mean, if you look at the curriculum in the 1950s when I went to a university, you see Greece and Rome, then all of a sudden you got these strange Gods. And then you found out there was something called a Celtic Revival, which was the assertion of the Irish to be inspired by their folklore and their mythologies instead of imitating, mimicking the Imperials or I guess the British were the Imperials at the time. And so that inspired me in the university. I said, these guys were trying to assert their own culture and ethnicity. I'm doing a thing with Zora Neale Hurston. I'm reading *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Karen Long:

Yes, that's an Anisfield-Wolf winning book.

Ishmael Reed:

Well, I received the North Star Award this year from the Hurston/Wright.

Karen Long:

Wonderful.

Ishmael Reed:

And the ceremony is in Washington in October. So in connection with that, I've been reading Zora Neale Hurston again, and she did a remarkable thing. She learned her education was Eurocentric, and she really excelled at that. But she used that to restore or to study black folklore. And in that sense, she was a preservationist. And I think that's what we've been doing with Before Columbus Foundation, which was inspired by my relationship with Carla Blank, because when I met Carla, she was in contact with different groups. You want to talk about that, Carla, the Indians that were in your household?

Carla Blank:

Yeah. Well, I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and right near what is now called Carnegie Mellon University. And after Independence, there was, I think it must've been a federally supportive program to bring students to study the sciences. And our home became... Because my mother's best friend was married to an Indian chemist who was leader of the Indian-American community in Pittsburgh, our home became a center where they just hung out and cooked on their weekends. And because we were four little girls and they were missing their children at home, they took us under their wing. And then when I started my professional career, I did a long collaboration with a Japanese dancer, Suzushi Hanayagi. And so I was taken in under their wing. I had just graduated college, and her circle of Japanese artists became friends of mine. So those were two particularly strong international connections that I had at the time when Ishmael and I started hanging out together.

Ishmael Reed:

So I was introduced to the Japanese-American and Indian community through Carla. Then we added people. And Before Columbus Foundation, which I began in 1976, it's sort like a result of that collaboration. And now, Before Columbus Foundation, we have two MacArthur winners, a Pulitzer Prize winner, winner of the Book of Prize, and two former poet laureates of the United States as directors.

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Karen Long:

Let's go.

Ishmael Reed:

We do the American Book Awards each year.

Karen Long:

Right.

Ishmael Reed:

The Washington Post calls the American Book Awards, the American League to the National Book Awards National League.

Karen Long:

Here we are. What do you think about Cornel West running for President?

Ishmael Reed:

I think it's a bad idea. I don't know. I think Cornel's ego needs a vacation because he's very seductive and charismatic. And what I say about Cornel is that he quotes theologians who use bigger words than Jesus. I mean, Jesus will say something like, I am the least of these. And he quotes these interpreters very difficult to decide what they're driving at. But a reelection of Trump would set us back a hundred years. And I'd saw a poll in Michigan where if Cornel ran, he'd get 3% and Michigan would go to Trump. So I don't know what's happening with the East Coast black intelligentsia. I mean, they gave us critical race theory if that wasn't bad enough. It's a graduate school thing.

But now I think a lot of them are, what I say, those that nod off at the dinner party and asleep at the brunch because they do not realize the threat Cornel West is making and helping. And then I saw him... I don't know what's going on. I saw him defend Putin. I mean, Putin is poisoning his adversaries and the stuff he's doing in Ukraine is just horrible, genocide. And then he's saying, well, NATO's behind the whole line, NATO's behind the whole thing, and it's NATO's fault and all this kind of stuff. So I don't know what's going with Cornel, but I see a deafening silence from the black intelligentsia. And I just don't know the reason for that. But I wish that he would just continue the kind of scholarship that he does, quoting these hard to read and hard to understand theologians.

Karen Long:

Well, it loops us back to "Yesterday's Newsreel Was Chasing Me" because that's the fire he's playing with, perhaps.

Ishmael Reed:

Absolutely. The newsreel will catch up with you.

Karen Long:

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Well, this has been really joyful and you've been so generous, and it's good to see your faces. I long to see them unpixelated, and I think that we might have a chance by and by, I hope.

Carla Blank:

Oh, thank you, Karen.

Ishmael Reed:

Well, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Karen Long:

Be well.

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.