

FILM REVIEW

'Teen Titans' is meta and funny at times, but it presumes too much.

Page D2

STARLIVING

MUSIC

Billy Joel's got a good job and hits in his head.

Page D3

Houston Chronicle @HoustonChron

Houston Chronicle Thursday, July 26, 2018 | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

Section D ★★

BOOKS

Reading series draws Lethem, Wolitzer to Houston

By Andrew Dansby
STAFF WRITER

Houston's creative writing organization InPrint on Monday announced authors for its esteemed Margaret Root Brown Reading Series' 2018-19 season. Among the authors whose names are preceded by phrases like "best-selling" and "award-winning" are Jonathan Lethem and Barbara Kingsolver.

Lethem — an acclaimed novelist and essayist — will read on Nov. 12, a week after his new novel "The Feral Detective" publishes. Longtime readers may be excited to learn the book finds Lethem returning to the detective novel construct for the first time since his breakthrough, "Motherless Brooklyn," in 1999.

Kingsolver, whose eye is often pulled to topical and global stories, comes to Houston with "Unsheltered," her first novel in six years.

InPrint's 2018-19 season
InPrint continues on D2



Jonathan Lethem and Meg Wolitzer will be featured in InPrint's reading series.

InPrint info

InPrint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 2018-19 season:

SEPT. 24: Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer at Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston

OCT. 22: Barbara Kingsolver at Cullen Performance Hall

NOV. 12: Jonathan Lethem and Gary Shteyngart at Cullen Performance Hall

JAN. 14: Claudia Rankine at Stude Concert Hall, Rice University

FEB. 26: Valeria Luiselli and Tommy Orange at Stude Concert Hall

MARCH 25: Carmen Giménez Smith and Fady Joudah at Stude Concert Hall

APRIL 22: Tayari Jones and Richard Powers at Stude Concert Hall

InPrint will host two reading events for youths

InPrint from page D1

opens Sept. 24 with Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer. Canadian novelist Edugyan was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for “Half-Blood Blues” in 2011. Her third novel, “Washington Black,” will be published this September. Wolitzer’s latest novel is “The Female Persuasion,” a thorny look at

gender and mentorship. One of Wolitzer’s earlier works, “The Wife,” also was recently made into a feature film that should be in Houston theaters later this summer.

The season concludes April 22 with Tayari Jones, whose “An American Marriage” was published earlier this year and was picked for Oprah’s Book Club. Also on the bill April 22

is Richard Powers, whose “The Overstory” is a near-indescribable story about humankind and trees. Yes, trees.

InPrint also will host two events in its Cool Brains! Series for young readers. Girl Scouts of the USA CEO and rocket scientist Sylvia Acevedo will read from her memoir “Path to the Stars” on Sept. 16 at the Meyerland Per-

forming and Visual Arts Middle School.

And on Nov. 4, Newbery Honor winner Jason Reynolds will read from “Lu, (Track Book 4).”

InPrint season tickets go on sale Aug. 1. More information on InPrint and its season can be found at inprinthouston.org.

andrew.dansby@chron.com



Nina Subin

Tayari Jones



Jonathan Lethem, Barbara Kingsolver coming to Houston for InPrint's 2018-19 schedule

By Andrew Dansby | July 23, 2018



IMAGE 1 OF 3

Novelist, essayist and short story writer, Jonathan Lethem.

Houston's creative writing organization InPrint on Monday announced authors for its esteemed Margaret Root Brown Reading Series' 2018-19 season. Among the authors whose names are preceded by phrases like "best-selling" and "award-winning" are Jonathan Lethem and Barbara Kingsolver.

Lethem -- an acclaimed novelist and essayist -- will read on Nov. 12, a week after his new novel "The Feral Detective" publishes. Longtime readers may be excited to learn the book finds Lethem returning to the detective novel construct for the first time since his breakthrough, "Motherless Brooklyn," in 1999.

Kingsolver, whose eye is often pulled to topical and global stories, comes to Houston with "Unsheltered," her first novel in six years.

InPrint's 2018-19 season opens Sept. 24 with Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer. Canadian novelist Edugyan was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for "Half-Blood Blues" in 2011. Her third novel, "Washington Black," will be published this September. Wolitzer's latest novel is "The Female Persuasion," a thorny look at gender and mentorship. One of Wolitzer's earlier works, "The Wife," was also recently made into a feature film that should be in Houston theaters later this summer.

The season concludes April 22 with Tayari Jones, whose "An American Marriage" published earlier this year and was picked for Oprah's Book Club. Also on the bill April 22 is Richard Powers, whose "The Overstory" is a near-indescribable story about humankind and trees. Yes, trees.

InPrint will also host two events in its Cool Brains! Series for young readers. Girl Scouts of the USA CEO and rocket scientist Sylvia Acevedo will read from her memoir "Path to the Stars" on Sept. 16 at the Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School.

And on Nov. 4 Newbery Honor winner Jason Reynolds will read from "Lu, (Track Book 4)."

InPrint season tickets go on sale Aug. 1. More information on InPrint and its season can be found [here](#).

InPrint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 2018-2019 season:

Sept. 24: Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer at Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston

Oct. 22: Barbara Kingsolver at Cullen Performance Hall

Nov. 12: Jonathan Lethem and Gary Shteyngart at Cullen Performance Hall

Jan. 14: Claudia Rankine at Stude Concert Hall, Rice University

Feb. 26: Valeria Luiselli and Tommy Orange at Stude Concert Hall

March 25: Carmen Giménez Smith and Fady Joudah at Stude Concert Hall

April 22: Tayari Jones and Richard Powers at Stude Concert Hall

RELATED



The Pilot Dance Project presents Lori Yuill's 'Green Zebras'



Photos from Ice Cube's visit to Houston as part of youth basketball initiative, Big3 opening game



Texas Book Festival announces first round of authors for 2018 Festival Weekend



Andrew Dansby

Entertainment Writer,
Houston Chronicle

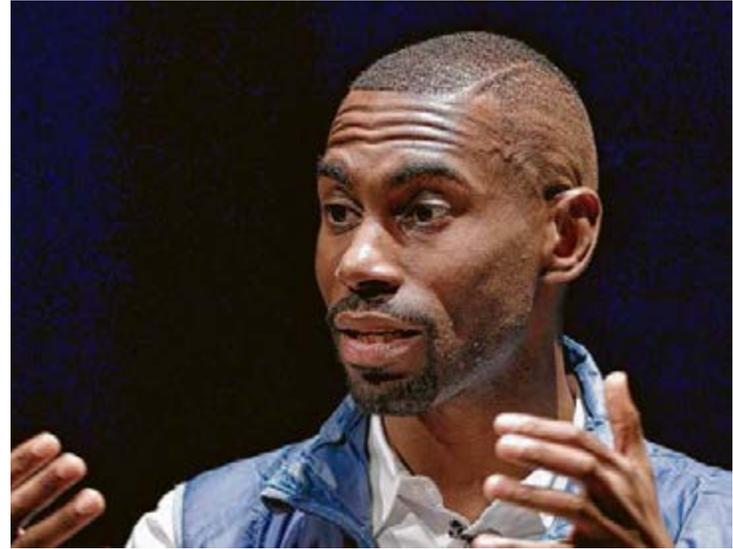
READINGS



Annie Griffiths



Amy Maloof



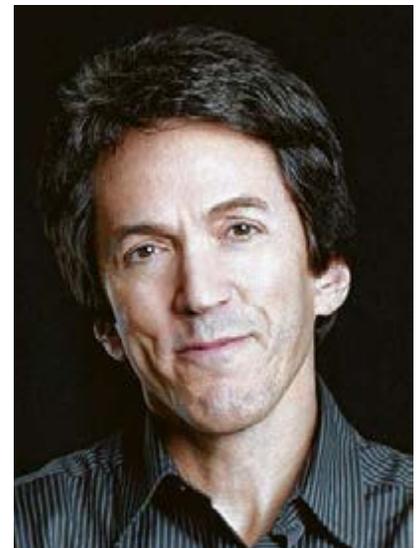
Michael Wyke



Nina Subin



Courtesy photo



Courtesy photo

**Top, from left: Barbara Kingsolver, Jonathan Lethem, DeRay McKesson
Bottom, from left: Meg Wolitzer, Sylvia Acevedo, Mitch Albom**

A strong collection of authors, thinkers and writers will be stepping into Houston's literary realm this year to help us better understand the world and ourselves. Some highlights: Mitch Albom, civil rights activist DeRay McKesson and respected author Barbara Kingsolver.

FINE ARTS | READINGS

AUGUST

14 | Joe and Kasey Lansdale:

Authors discuss their new book "Terror Is Our Business." Murder By The Book.

SEPTEMBER

14 | DeRay McKesson:

Civil rights leader will read from book "On the Other Side of Freedom." The Ballroom at Bayou Place.

16 | Sylvia Acevedo:

Will read "Path to the Stars" as part of Inprint Cool Brains! Series. Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School.

24 | Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer:

Appearing as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston.

26 | Major Garrett:

CBS News reporter appears with his new book about covering President Donald Trump. Brazos Bookstore.

28 | Houston SCBWI Annual Conference:

Event will feature keynote speaker Linda Sue Park as well as agents, editors and illustrators. The Marriott Houston Westchase. Through Sept. 30.

OCTOBER

6 | Jodi Picoult:

Author of "Small Great Things" talks about her new book. Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church.

11 | Mike Reiss:

"The Simpsons" writer talks about his book regarding that work. Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center. Acclaimed author reads



Brigitte Lacombe

Gary Shteyngart

from his book "The Next Person You Meet in Heaven." Christ Church Cathedral.

Houston Poetry Fest:

Readings and workshops. Willow Street Pump Station at the University Houston-Downtown. Through Oct. 14.

13 | Tweens Read:

Festival features authors who write books for students in fifth-grade through eighth-grade. South Houston High School.

16 | Ron Chernow:

Pulitzer winner reads from his book about Ulysses S. Grant. Christ Church Cathedral.

22 | Barbara Kingsolver:

"Poisonwood Bible" author appears as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston.

26 | National Black Book Festival:

Features African-American authors. Fallbrook Church. Through Oct. 27.

NOVEMBER

3 | Jewish Book & Arts Festival:

Includes authors Rachel Kadish and Nell Scovell.

Most events at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center. Through Nov. 13

4 | Jason Reynolds:

Will read "Lu" as a part of Inprint Cool Brains! Series. Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School.

12 | Jonathan Lethem and Gary Shteyngart:

Appearing as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston.

JANUARY

14 | Claudia Rankine:

Best-selling author and poet appears as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Stude Concert Hall, Rice University.

FEBRUARY

26 | Valeria Luiselli and Tommy Orange:

"Faces in the Crowd" and "There, There" authors appearing as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Stude Concert Hall, Rice University.

MARCH

25 | Carmen Giménez Smith and Fady Joudah:

Poets appearing as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Stude Concert Hall, Rice University.

APRIL

22 | Tayari Jones and Richard Powers:

Authors appearing as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Stude Concert Hall, Rice University.

2018-2019

INPRINT MARGARETT ROOT BROWN Reading Series

All readings begin
at **7:30 pm**

For tickets,
locations & details
inprinthouston.org



ESI EDUGYAN &
MEG WOLITZER

September 24, 2018



BARBARA KINGSOLVER

October 22, 2018



JONATHAN LETHEM &
GARY SHTEYNGART

November 12, 2018



CLAUDIA RANKINE

January 14, 2019



VALERIA LUISELLI &
TOMMY ORANGE

February 26, 2019



CARMEN GIMÉNEZ SMITH
& FADY JOUDAH

March 25, 2019



TAYARI JONES &
RICHARD POWERS

April 22, 2019



inprint

The Brown Foundation, Inc.



National
Endowment
for the Arts



houstonartsalliance

BRAZOS
BOOKSTORE

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON
Creative Writing Program

ADVERTISEMENT



Arts & Culture > Books & Talks

GOOD READS

Here Comes the 2018-2019 Inprint Lineup

Need a good book? Start with these.

By [Morgan Kinney](#) • 7/24/2018 at 11:45am

70



Clear your coffee table for the 2018-2019 Inprint lineup.

IMAGE: [COURTESY OF PUBLISHERS](#)

HOUSTONIANS HAVE A DOZEN NEW MUST-READ BOOKS from the latest Margarett Root Brown Reading Series.

Announced Monday evening, Inprint's three-decade tradition continues to bring top literary talent to Houston. Included this year are familiar faces like Jonathan Lethem and Gary Shteyngart, who have both [appeared previously at Inprint](#), as well as rising literary stars like Tommy Orange, the Native American writer whose debut novel, *There There*, has been widely hailed as the book of the summer.

Other highlights: Esi Edugyan reads from *Washington Black*, her third novel that questions whether a former slave can ever truly be free, alongside veteran Meg Wolitzer, whose 11th novel, *The Female Persuasion*, was hailed by Kirkus as "a feminist blockbuster." Poet Claudia Rankine will read from her 2014 book-length lyric *Citizen* shortly before National Book Award finalist Carmen Giménez Smith recites poetry in tandem with Houston's own Fady Joudah. Oprah-approved Tayari Jones will also [return to the Bayou City](#) to cap off the season with a reading from her most recent novel, *An American Marriage*.

You can find the full lineup—including dates—listed below.

Additionally, Inprint announced the first portion of its Cool Brains! series geared toward younger readers. So far, Girl Scouts CEO Sylvia Acevedo will read her memoir focusing on her path to becoming a NASA rocket scientist, while Jason Reynolds is on deck with *Lu*, the fourth installment in the *Track* series following a group of children recruited to an elite track team.

Tickets for each reading are on sale starting August 1, with more information available at inprinthouston.org.

Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series | 2018-2019

September 24: Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer

October 22: Barbara Kingsolver

November 12: Jonathan Lethem and Gary Shteyngart

January 14: Claudia Rankine

February 26: Valeria Luiselli and Tommy Orange

March 25: Carmen Giménez Smith and Fady Joudah

April 22: Tayari Jones and Richard Powers

Inprint Cool Brains! Series | 2018-2019

September 16: Sylvia Acevedo

November 4: Jason Reynolds

Filed under

[Readings & Lectures](#), [Stude Concert Hall](#), [Inprint](#), [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series](#)

BAYOU CITY Art Festival DOWNTOWN LEA MO

LITERATURE

10 Things To Know about Inprint And Its 2018-19 Season

A profile of the Houston literary organization’s programs, reading series, and daily life in ten questions

CATHERINE LU | SEPTEMBER 21, 2018, 6:02 PM (LAST UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 21, 2018, 6:26 PM)



Rich Levy remembers joining Inprint in 1995 as Executive Director.

“It was me and a part-time person ... our budget was less than 1/6 what it is now, and we’ve added so many new programs over the response to the reading and writing community in Houston.”

Levy and Krupa Parikh, Communications and Community Relations Director, both have personally been a part of programing the organization’s flagship program – the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series – for about the past 20 years.

Now in its 38th season, that series is an annual showcase of the world's leading writers presented in Houston performance venues, where they read from and talk about their work, are interviewed on-stage, and meet audience members during a book signing afterwards.

Parikh, who also produces the podcast, *Ink Well*, joined Inprint in 1998, and says that what she loves most about her job is “the people including colleagues, Houstonians who come to readings, educators with whom they collaborate, writers who participate in workshops supporters.

“We all share a collective passion for reading and writing. And that is what is so exciting about helping bring great writers to Houston, these readings touch the lives of so many people.”

Rich Levy and Krupa Parikh answer ten questions about Inprint and its 2018-19 season below.



Courtesy of Inprint

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri was featured on the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on January 29, 2018 at UH Cullen Hall

1. What do you look for when you curate the series each season? Also, do you program with a “Houston” audience in mind, considering the writers and themes that would be appeal to this community?

Krupa: The Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series is national and international in scope, and we are very proud of this because Houston is an international city. We think it is important to have a series that speaks to that diversity, and we strive to create a series that feels inclusive to Houstonians.

Rich: When we curate the series we are always trying to present top literary authors – fiction writers, poets, and creative nonfiction. We want to make sure we have authors from a diversity of backgrounds, and we want to make sure there is a good balance of men and women in the season.

Krupa: We also like to have some blockbuster authors that are perhaps more well-known among readers, as well as a few writers each year that may not be as well-known but are destined to be big in the literary world.

Rich: In addition to the authors reading from their work, there is an on-stage interview with a local writer, scholar, or artist. This helps bring the readings a local connection. Our on-stage interviewers this season include Robin Davidson, Andrea White, Robert Cremins, R

Lowe, Daniel Peña, Jasminne Mendez, and Chitra Divakaruni, all well-known Houstonians in the arts and literary scene.



Tamara Poppitt

Man Booker Prize finalist Esi Edugyan will read from her new novel, "Washington Black" on September 24, 2018 at University of Houston's Cullen Performance Hall

2. You're opening the 2018-19 season on September 24th with novelists Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer. Can you tell us a little about them, as well as what you personally find exciting about their latest novels, from which they'll be reading?

Krupa: It feels that we are presenting Esi Edugyan, a Canadian writer of Ghanaian descent, at the very moment when she is beginning to reach a much larger audience through her brilliant new novel (her third novel), Washington Black. The book, set in the 1830s in Barbados on a sugar plantation, follows the journey of an 11-year-old field slave, George Washington Black, as he transits, through a mix of compassion, and the world of science, to freedom – but at a cost. The reviews have been stunning, including the recent front page New York Times Book Review, and Edugyan was just named a Man Booker Prize finalist. And although historic, this novel highlights the issues surrounding race that we continue to grapple with today.

Rich: Meg Wolitzer will be reading from her 12th novel, *The Female Persuasion*, which is an engrossing and timely novel. Many of Wolitzer's novels have become *New York Times* bestsellers, and this one is no different. It was one of the most anticipated novels by *Time*, *New York Magazine*, and other major publications. *The New York Times* describes it as "uncannily timely, a prescient subject and moment that addresses a great question of the day: how feminism passes down, or not, from one generation to the next. It will be wonderful to see these two terrific writers on stage together. After the reading, they will join former Houston Poet Laureate/Downtown faculty member Robin Davidson, who is incredibly thoughtful and will lead the two in what promises to be a fascinating conversation.



Nina Subin

Bestselling author Meg Wolitzer will read from "The Female Persuasion" on September 24, 2018 at University of Houston's Cullen Performance Hall

3. If you don't mind my asking, how have you kept ticket prices at a minimum of \$5 for nearly 40 years?

Krupa: Thank you for acknowledging this and asking about this. It is something we are very committed to doing and work hard to r The actual cost to the organization for each reading is much, much higher than \$5, but thanks to our very generous underwriters a

Brown Foundation, Inc. and the National Endowment for the Arts, we have been able to keep ticket prices very low and provide free tickets for students and senior citizens.

Rich: It's an important way to ensure access, from across the community, and this leaves money in our patrons' pockets to buy books. Always important to publishers.

4. Recently a GQ Magazine article called Houston the “New Capital of Southern Cool,” and touched on its food scene, arts scene, and music scene. How would you describe Houston's literary scene? Do you think it's also at the “cool” forefront?

Rich: I think it's safe to say that Houston's literary scene is as rich, lively, and diverse as any in the country – and we are enormously proud of that. Several members of our staff have been working in this vineyard for two decades or more, attracting some of the nation's top writers to Houston (through our fellowships and prizes at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program – more than \$4 million since 1983), providing vital workshops and venues for local writers of all ages and backgrounds (including K-12 teachers, senior citizens, veterans, healthcare providers, and of course aspiring writers), while also presenting some of the world's great writers for adults and children, and keeping it all accessible and diverse. We think that's very cool.



Valeria Luiselli
PHOTO CREDIT: Diego Berruecos/Gatopardo

Diego Berruecos, Gatopardo

Celebrated Mexican author & “Los Angeles Times” Book Prize winner Valeria Luiselli will read on February 26, 2019 at Rice University's Stude Concert Hall

5. Who are some of the other acclaimed writers and new voices appearing later this season, and what kinds of themes do they tackle?

Rich: There is so much new exciting work, from writers who rarely if ever come to Houston. Barbara Kingsolver will be here next month with her new novel, Unsheltered, that documents life in the U.S. in uncertain times, both now and 150 years ago; Jonathan Lethem with his new novel, The Feral Detective, that is an edgy, funny, and utterly contemporary take on the genre; Claudia Rankine will present her acclaimed poetry and discuss her new play, The White Card, much of which confronts issues of race and privilege; Tommy Orange will be reading from his brilliant, heartbreaking, intense debut novel, There There, about urban Native American life in contemporary Oakland.

Valeria Luiselli is presenting her first novel in English, Lost Children Archive, about a family's road trip across the United States and tackles issues of justice and inequality.

Krupa: Poet Carmen Giménez Smith's latest poetry collection, Cruel Futures, has been described as a "Latina feminist State of the address." We are excited to feature a Houston-based internationally renowned Palestinian poet/translator/physician, Fady Joudah will share his latest poetry collection, Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance. Tayari Jones' latest novel, An American Marriage, on an African American couple and what happens to them when the husband is wrongly incarcerated. Richard Powers' recent novel Overstory, which was just shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker Prize, spans decades and has "talking" trees and a diverse cast of characters, touching on themes of the environment and other social issues.



Courtesy of Amy Maloof

National Book Critics Circle Award winner Jonathan Lethem will read on November 12, 2018 at University of Houston's Cullen Performance Hall.

6. Inprint's Margarett Root Brown Reading Series is called "one of the premier reading series in the nation." How unique is it U.S.?

Rich: One of the things that makes our literary series unique is that it focuses exclusively on fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction than 370 writers since 1980, from 35 countries, including winners of nine Nobel Prizes, 62 Pulitzer Prizes, 56 National Book Award National Book Critics Circle Awards, and 15 Man Booker Prizes, as well as 19 U.S. Poets Laureate. We do not feature historians, science writers, research-based authors. We focus on the craft of creative writing.

Krupa: The other thing that is unique, in comparison to series of similar caliber in New York, Seattle, San Francisco, is really the prioritize accessibility in our series, and to see these same authors in other cities would cost you \$20, \$30, even \$40.

7. The Margaret Root Brown Series is your primary reading series, but you also offer other community programs. Can you tell us a bit about the Cool Brains! Series for young readers? And you provide workshops and buskers! How can people get a poem spontaneously by a poetry busker?

Krupa: We started the free Inprint Cool Brains! Series about 10 years ago, and it is a real delight. Each year, we conduct three to four readings on Sunday afternoons at Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School. We just had a great reading, featuring Giannina Busch CEO and former NASA rocket scientist Sylvia Acevedo, who recently published a memoir for middle-grade readers entitled Path to Stars. She was such an inspiring speaker, and we had close to 600 kids and parents in attendance. On November 4, we will present lit rock star, Jason Reynolds, who will be reading from his new book, LU (#4 in the beloved Track series). We give away at least 100 books to families at each reading and also provide bus scholarships to these events for school groups from across the Houston metro area thanks to the support of HEB.

Rich: Helping Houstonians become better writers and better able to share their stories in writing is core to Inprint's mission. We co-sponsor a variety of workshops at our office for the general public, as well as tuition-free workshops across the Houston community for K-12 teachers, senior citizens, veterans, the incarcerated, healthcare employees, and more.

Krupa: And Inprint Poetry Buskers – yes! The Inprint Poetry Buskers bring the joy of poetry to festivals and public events each year. Our troupe of traveling poets, composed primarily of grad students and alumni from the UH Creative Writing Program, write poems on the spot chosen by the recipient – on the spot and free of charge, sharing the magic and accessibility of poetry one-on-one with patrons of events across the greater Houston region.

8. Your events take place at venues around the city, but where is your office located? It must be brimming with creativity! I see people drinking coffee and reading books all day.

Rich: We wish! We are very lucky that our offices are located in the heart of the Menil campus, on the same street as Writers In The Schools, in the same neighborhood as Da Camera and the Rothko Chapel, and a block from The Menil Collection. We are in an office building that has been renovated by the Menil Foundation. Thanks to Houston author Caroline Leech, we now have a bright orange Little L on our front lawn. It is wonderful to be in this neighborhood, and it does feel like a privilege to be around these great Houston arts institutions.

Krupa: I wish I could say we were drinking coffee all the time and reading books, that would be so fun! Most of the time we, the staff, have our head down finishing reports, planning events, working on logistics, etc. Once a week, on Friday mornings, we open the doors to our office space for what is called the Inprint Writing Café, a free quiet place for writers to come and do some writing. It is sweet to have our office open to the office on Friday mornings and see writers working diligently on their prose. Our many workshops also take place at Inprint House and it is great to see aspiring writers from all parts of the city come and gather in our space to write. We also have other groups, like Fridays and Tintero Readings & Workshops, who use Inprint House to conduct events. So yes, the house is always brimming with energy, and that is so inspiring to see.

9. What is one of the most memorable moments that happened during a reading? Most unusual or funniest moment?

Krupa: There have been so many memorable moments, it is hard to pinpoint just one. That is the great thing about Inprint reading – you never know what may happen on-stage. George Saunders' choral reading, along with five Alley Theatre actors, of Lincoln in the Bardo was amazing. Poet Kim Addonizio, when giving a reading with poet Terrance Hayes, played the harmonica in between reading poems in the lobby of the Menil Collection, which was quite beautiful. In November 2013, with Alley Theatre's A Christmas Carol as the backdrop,

stage set, Nigerian writer [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) and Irish writer [Colum McCann](#) broke into song as part of the on-stage inter conducted by South Asian writer [Chitra Divakaruni](#), which was a funny and awesome scene, very memorable.

Rich: And of course we hosted [Salman Rushdie](#) on his first book tour after the fatwa had been declared – which was on 9/10/2001 night before 9/11. That's a whole other story.



Courtesy of Inprint

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen signs books following his Inprint reading on November 13, 2017 at Rice's Stude Concert Hall

10. Reading a novel or poem that you connect with, and that moves you, is such a magical experience, in and of itself. What people get out of coming to hear the author read their own work? What kind of experience does Inprint hope each reading b its audiences?

Krupa: This is so true, it is a magical experience, that is the best way to describe it. Reading a book, a book you love, is a very inti experience. It is in your head, you spend hours with the book, and if it is a great book, it can move you and get under your skin. By to a reading, you get to make that private experience a collective one, an experience that connects you to a community. By hearin author read his or her own work and by hearing him or her talk about the work, we hope people leave the readings with a deeper a shared understanding of the content, an appreciation for the process of writing, and sometimes even a new lens through which to experience the written text.

Rich: Also, there is something very gratifying about seeing your favorite author on-stage, in your own city, coming to Houston to er with Houston audiences. It brings you closer to the work of the author. And for those writers and books you are unfamiliar with, it e you to a whole new world. We hope audiences feel this way by coming to the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

Share



BOOK

Author Esi Edugyan drawn to stories outside the margins

By Cary Darling
STAFF WRITER

Esi Edugyan knows what it's like to be an outsider.

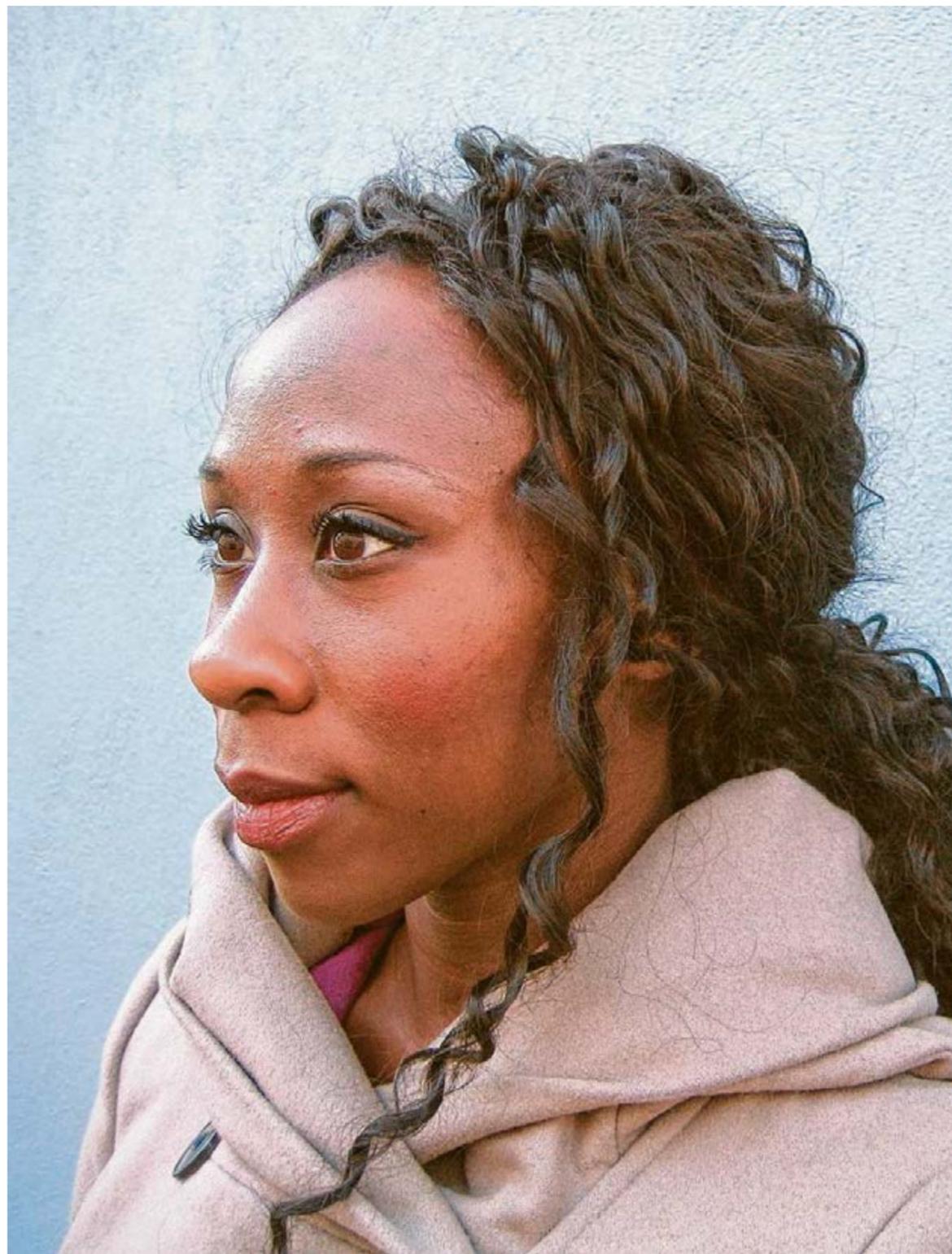
The daughter of Ghanaian immigrants who had immigrated to the western Canadian city of Calgary – in a province, Alberta, that is sometimes called “the Texas of Canada” – she has rarely been able to easily blend in. She's tapped into that wellspring of otherness over the course of her three novels, including her first in 2004, “The Second Life of Samuel Tyne,” about a black family in rural Alberta in the '60s, and the widely acclaimed “Half-Blood Blues,” a lyrical chronicle of black jazz musicians caught in the nightmare of Nazi Germany that was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2011.

In her latest, “Washington Black,” she turns to the 19th century to tell a story of a young slave named Washington – “Wash” for short – who, thanks to an inventor and abolitionist named Christopher Wilde, ends up fleeing on an odyssey that takes him from the shackles of Barbados to the freedom of the Arctic and Morocco. It's loosely inspired by Victorian England's real-life Tichborne case in which a former Jamaican slave living in England, Andrew Bogle, was sent by the family for whom he had long worked as a valet to Australia to identify a man some believed to be a long-missing heir named Roger Tichborne.

But after completing most of a draft that hewed closely to history, Edugyan – who appears Monday at Houston's Cullen Performance Hall as part of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series – decided to dispense with the details of that particular story.

“I was more interested in the psychology of going from one very predetermined life as a slave – and he'd been born on a plantation and seen horrible deaths and probably just assumed that he was also going to die probably unnaturally and young – to being put in a place that was just so different from everything he'd known, linguistically, geographically, climate and culturally,” Edugyan said by phone from her home in Victoria, British Columbia. “You know, I was just more interested in that, and so that became my focus. I completely abandoned the framework of Tichborne.”

In fact, at first, she hadn't planned on writing a slave narrative at all, and still doesn't really consider it such. “It wasn't conceived as a slave story. I think if I had thought of it that way from the very outset, I think it would have been very daunting, and I don't



Steven Price

Esi Edugyan

know if I would have been able to persevere,” she said. “But because I was looking at this very specific character and his circumstances, and I knew that he would leave the plantation at one point, I was looking at it as being more like a *post-slavery* narrative than a book about slavery. I was able to get my mind around that. ... (But) all the punishments described in the book are taken from life. ... When you're researching this material, obviously, it weighs on you.”

Growing up black and Canadian

Though writing from the perspective of the outsider is not something Edugyan says she does consciously, she concedes it's an inescapable element in her work. “This pattern of the outsider is something that I can understand looking back over the last three novels,” she said. “It certainly wasn't in the

forefront of my mind when I was writing any of the books.”

But she says she is drawn to stories about those on the margins, as when she first read about Alberta's early black settlements, an idea that became the basis for “The Second Life of Samuel Tyne.”

“I was really, really, really floored,” she recalled. “I think maybe I'm attracted to those stories because I was – I wouldn't say marginalized, I wouldn't use that word – but I certainly felt a bit apart.”

Black Canadians make up less than 3 percent of Canada's population of just over 36 million, with most in the eastern provinces of Ontario, Québec and Nova Scotia, which were either the terminus for the Underground Railroad or have been magnets for immigration from the Caribbean. Calgary, more than 2,000 miles west of

Toronto, saw much less of this activity. So, growing up there had its challenges.

“There was a sense of being very much the lone figure,” she said. “It's difficult because you feel a little bit representative of a whole, and people are looking to you that way. I think as a kid that can be a bit daunting. I think it's quite a bit more vision when it comes to what I want to explore ... I haven't lived there in so long, and I understand that it's quite a bit more multicultural and quite different. But certainly, in the early '80s, yeah, there was not a lot of racial diversity.”

“It was a very, very conservative province in general. In terms of race relations, I grew up feeling a bit of a curiosity. You walk down the street and people would be turning to look. ... As a child, it can't help but inform your psyche a bit.”

Going to Ghana for the

first time in 2007 with her family proved to be both strikingly foreign and familiar.

“We looked as though we belonged in terms of our features, but people could tell right away that ‘You're not from here,’ even before we opened our mouths,” she remembered. “There was a sense of – I had the same feeling (as in Canada), it was very distinct. We definitely stood out in some kind of indiscernible way. ... We understood that we were not a part of this culture in a way. We were both a part of it and not a part of it. At some point, somebody pointed at me and referred to me as ‘oburoni,’ which is white person. ... That was really funny.”

Edugyan dealt with some of these vexing cross-cultural issues in her 2014 nonfiction work, “Dreaming of Elsewhere:

Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer reading

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday

Where: University of Houston, Cullen Performance Hall, 4300 University

Details: \$5; 713-521-2026; inprintheouston.org

Observations of Home.” Yet, the more she travels the world, the more she's thankful for having Canadian roots, no matter how many alienating moments the country may have caused her in the past.

“Obviously, no place is perfect. We still have a long way to go with aboriginal people and just race relations in general but ... I've lived and traveled to a great many places in the world, and I do think that, speaking as an African-Canadian, maybe we're doing a better job of it than certain other places,” she said. “It's the desire to meet or try and live up to that stereotype of the happy multicultural nation. I think that's good.”

All in the family

Edugyan isn't the only writer in her household. She's married to poet/novelist Steven Price, a professor of poetry and literature at the University of Victoria. Having a kindred spirit as a spouse has been essential for her own creativity.

“We definitely are deep into each other's work,” she said. “His editorial skills are just so finely honed, so he'll read over several drafts of every one of my novels ... I think the novels would be completely different novels without his input. He's been so instrumental in my editorial process.”

Having a child in 2011 changed things a bit, not in terms of what she writes but when and where. She used to write only in the quietude of late nights. A newborn made that impossible.

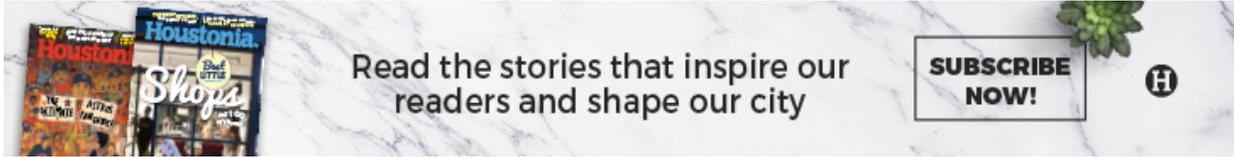
“I'm able to write in places that I couldn't do it before,” she said with a laugh. “So I can write in hotel rooms. I've written on planes. ... Before, I had to have complete silence, and if somebody coughed in the next room, it would drive me crazy. ... Now, it's a good skill to be able to write with the noise and chaos.”

cary.darling@chron.com

GO... WITH JO! TRAVELS
COPPER CANYON SPECIAL
(7 Days).....11/11
SAN MIGUEL (6 Days).....11/19
CALL TODAY!
1-800-999-1446/www.gowithjo.com



ADVERTISEMENT



Arts & Culture > Books & Talks

FEMALE PERSUASION

The Meg Wolitzer 'Moment' Continues in Houston

We talk feminism and Ouisie's Table with the celebrated novelist ahead of her Inprint reading.

By [Brittanie Shey](#) • 9/20/2018 at 1:30pm

19

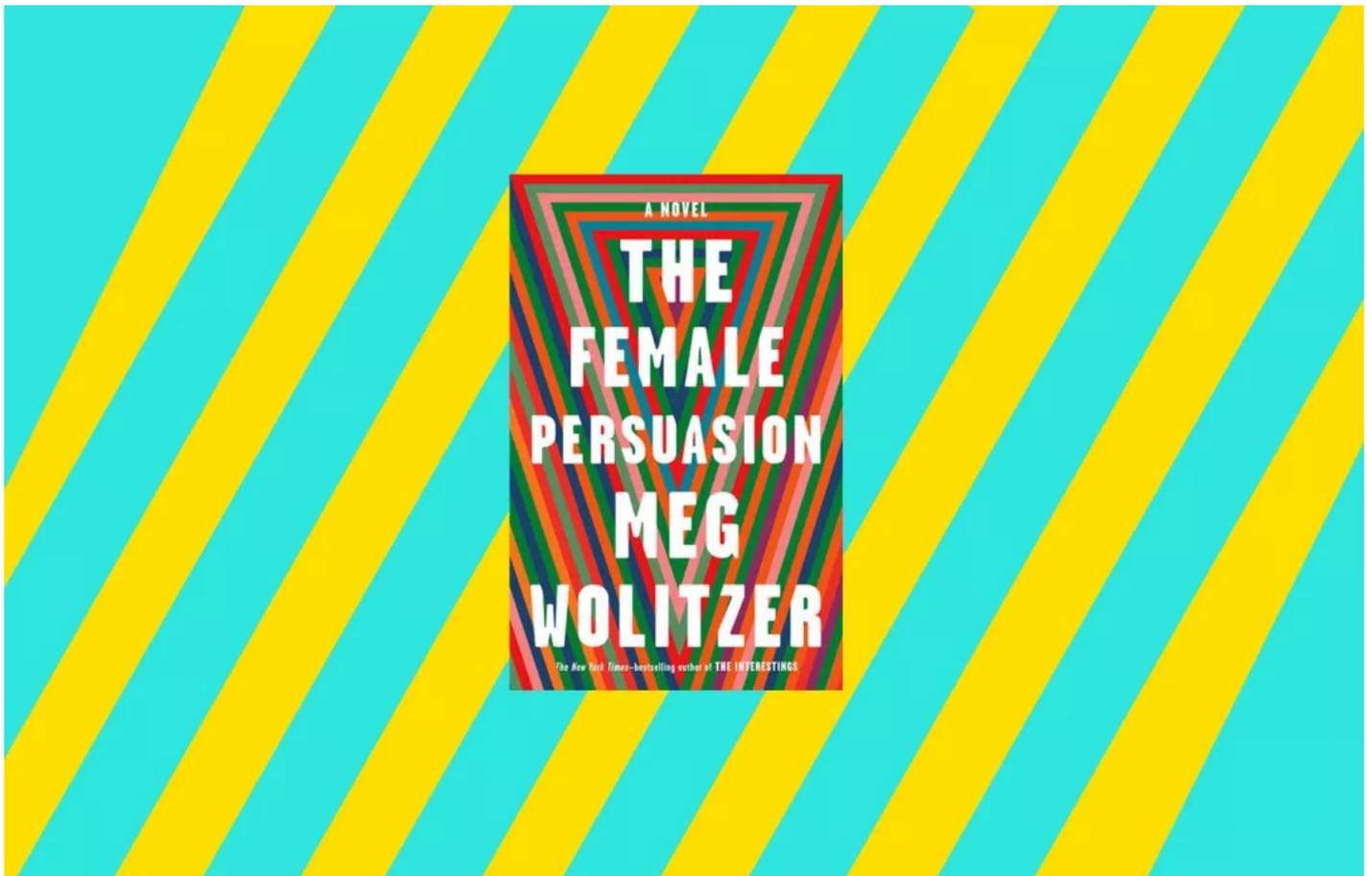


IMAGE: [COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE](#)

IN MARCH, THE NEW YORK TIMES DECLARED 2018 MEG WOLITZER'S MOMENT. Though the author has more than a dozen novels under her belt, her much-discussed (and timely) book *The Female Persuasion*, published earlier this

year, is accompanied by a film adaptation of her 2003 book, *The Wife*, starring Glenn Close in a role that has already been generating awards buzz.

Wolitzer will visit Houston on Monday, September 24, as the first of this season's Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading series, [alongside novelist Esi Edugyan](#). Ahead of her reading, we spoke to Wolitzer about Houston in the '80s, online distractions, and capturing the zeitgeist.

I did not know you had lived in Houston.

Yes, I taught at the University of Houston in the mid-'80s. I lived in Montrose. Is that restaurant Ouisie's still there? I remember that name.

Yes, Ouisie's Table. It's in River Oaks. Have you visited Houston since then?

No, I haven't. I'm excited to be coming back. It's been a long time. I was young there, and now I'm less young. It was the last time I drove, I think. I live in New York City so we don't have a car. I drove around Houston, I bravely drove around, but I was so unused to it. And I remember the heat. I remember getting into my car in Houston and not being able to touch the steering wheel or the seatbelt. I used to go to the Rothko Chapel all the time. I have very good memories of being there, with Donald Barthelme and Rosellen Brown.

You've been writing for a long time, with more than a dozen novels under your belt. Now, this book from 15 years ago, *The Wife*, has been made into a movie that is getting a lot of attention. Is it weird to revisit something you wrote so long ago?

It's very weird. This one took so long to get made. It was really hard to set up a movie called *The Wife* and to get a male actor to want to be in this movie, not only one that's called *The Wife*, but it's about a guy—the husband has behaved badly. It just took forever, but Jane Anderson, the screenwriter, was really tenacious and stayed with it.

It's icing on the cake for a writer. You spend all this time at night lying in bed thinking about your book, and then to hear these actors you admire speaking these names aloud as if those people are real is just mind-blowing. But I think that if you create characters that feel fleshed out, they might be desirable to turn into films because people want to see actors go deeply into character. At least I do. And in this film, they really, really do. And Glenn is brilliant in it.

How has your creative process changed over the years now that we have things like Twitter, Facebook, and social media?

You have to be a disciplined person if you're going to be a writer in the 21st century. The truth is when I'm actually deep in a book I am not really distracted away from it. If I want to be there then all I want to do is write, and it's easier for me to tear myself away from the stupid things that I sometimes spend my time doing, including online Scrabble. Nobody's gonna tell you. You're not a kid and nobody's gonna tell you, "Put that thing away, stop looking up Top 10 resorts, you're not going anywhere, why are you doing that?"

I read an interview where you said that you don't write biographical novels. You write about whatever is obsessing you at the moment. What are you obsessed with right now?

Generally, politics. It's hard for me to imagine that the culture and the politics of our moment will not sort of seep into what I write. The novel gives you some space to really stretch out and explore things and take side trips. One of the things

a novel can do is become like a snapshot of a moment in time. What does it feel like to be at this moment when things are changing so fast.

When you were writing *The Female Persuasion*, which deals in part with issues of sexual assault and the various waves of feminism, you could have never know that the #MeToo movement was going to happen.

Yes, but these are issues that have been going on for a very long time. They're not new. They've just come to a sharper moment.

In the book, which tells the story of an intergenerational mentorship between two feminist women, there's also this idea that as women age, their value to society sort of decreases.

It's a youth-obsessed culture, and that's been true before the internet, but the internet lets bright, shiny young people show themselves, and there's this notion that older women feel invisible. It's sad that people might think that they don't have something that the world wants to see by virtue of their age.

I wanted to create, with Faith Frank, a character who has meant so much to so many people, but she seems connected to a previous time. There's this idea that you link a certain affectionate feeling for someone, a cultural figure, with the moment and where you were at that moment as well. I wanted to explore this idea of what we owe older people, what we give them, the differences between the generations. These women have grown up in different worlds.

There are real and legitimate criticisms that have been made of the women's movement, and social justice movements need to adapt, but I think that feminists want equality, and my job as a fiction writer is not to take sides. I just want to sort of look and say, "What is it like for these people? What is it like being them?"

Meg Wolitzer/Esi Edugyan, *Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series*, Sept. 24. Tickets \$5. Cullen Performance Hall, 4300 University Dr. 713-521-2026. More info and tickets at inprint.org.

Filed under

[Cullen Hall](#), [Readings](#), [Inprint](#), [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series](#), [Authors](#)

Show Comments

In this Article

EDITOR'S PICK

Ouisie's Table

\$\$\$ • Cajun, Creole, Southern • 3939 San Felipe St.

READINGS & LECTURES

Esi Edugyan and Meg Wolitzer

EDITOR'S PICK • 7:30 PM • Cullen Performance Hall

Popular Content



EIGHT PILES HIGH

You'll Want to Join This Club at Common Bond

BOOKS

Q&A

Kingsolver lets history flourish in 'Unsheltered'

By Andrew Dansby
STAFF WRITER

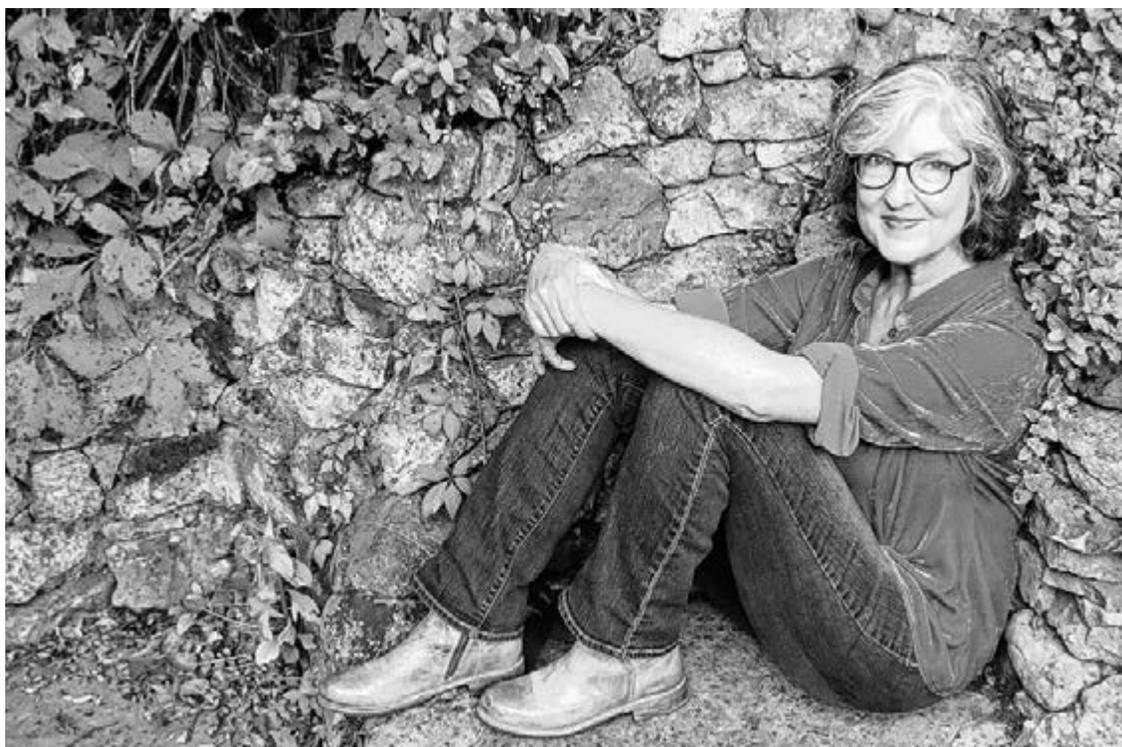
Early in Barbara Kingsolver's new novel "Unsheltered," reference is made to a grandparent named "Nonnie," which rang true to this particular grandson of Italian immigrants, who remembers his great-grandmother ... whom he called Nonnie.

The reference in Kingsolver's novel is a reminder of how malleable our culture once was, and how reluctant to change it currently is. The book also captures how quickly the door can shut once someone has passed through: the thorny and hypocritical nuts and bolts of an immigrant debate that is fiery red now but has been some softer shade of red for decades.

"We have this idea that history starts with me, now, but there's this difficult part of it where it also started with me a while ago," Kingsolver says. "The older I get, the more true that is. And it's fascinating to me that right now in this country, we're being led by men – and I'll say men because, as Tig (a character in the book) points out, people formed a notion of the world when she wasn't even born. We're still trying to figure out a booming post-World War II world, where there should be plenty of everything, but there isn't, and that's the world they're trying to fix. The rest of us are living in it and watching these solutions fail."

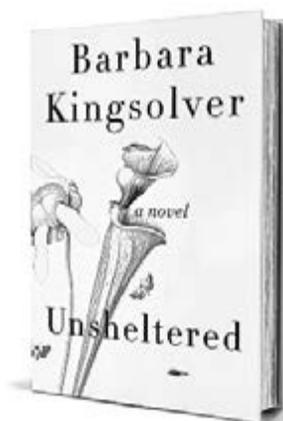
To her credit, Kingsolver doesn't try to frame the story as entirely contemporary, but rather applies a fascinating narrative device that hurls the book (and the house) back a century. She tells the story of Mary Treat, a Charles Darwin correspondent who has faded from history but was a remarkable thinker who shared thought space with the father of evolution and physical space with the contemporary Knox family, who thought it hit the property jackpot when it acquired her home in Vineland, N.J. In "Unsheltered," contemporary protagonist Willa Knox tries to salvage the "gift" by researching its background in hopes of finding historical value worthy of funding.

The home turns out to be an albatross, a literal crumbling sanctuary, with a rickety quality that underscores previously existing fissures among three generations of family. But it also



Steven Hopp /

"We keep trying to do things that worked in the past that don't work anymore. That was novel-worthy to me," author Barbara Kingsolver says.



'Unsheltered'
by Barbara Kingsolver
HarperCollins
480 pages, \$17.99

finds an apt historical allegorical figure in Charles Landis, the founder of Vineland, who had a utopian view of his town but one without much room for leeway. When a local reporter wrote negatively about the founder, Landis shot him in the back of the head. Kingsolver, who will speak Monday at the University of Houston, talked about Landis' complicated legacy and the forgotten passages of history.

Q: Something about the story here reminded me of "As I Lay Dying." The family is subjected to some horrible natural forces. I guess the big

difference is the matriarch isn't already dead.

A: Yes, yes, there's no carrying of the coffin, so to speak. But there's a sense of trials endured. We're in a difficult time for journalists. But you probably understand it's a middle-class job, like any other where you're supposed to follow the rules and that will lead to a secure life. There are similarities in academia. So many people are getting tossed onto the new streets.

Q: The lack of security, both in the older narrative and the newer narrative, feels like something you wanted to address.

A: Yes, and to say that's happening isn't necessarily novel-worthy. But to ask how we behave in the face of it, what mistakes we make time and again, that is. ... We cling so hard to old solutions to our new problems. We keep trying to do things that worked in the past that don't work anymore. That was novel-worthy to me.

Q: This story is interesting because there's not a singular

conflict. The conflicts are varied and span more than a century.

A: That's what a novel can do. It can examine human behavior in response to various conflicts. I learned in English class there are three great fictional conflicts: man against man, man against himself and man against nature. So I said, "Why not go for all three?" The novels I admire do that. There's a place for the small domestic dramatic psychological study. And I feel like women are expected to stick to that terrain. But I learned from Faulkner and Steinbeck and Gordimer and Lessing, don't stick to those limited stories. The good stories were the big ones.

Q: You set up a few challenges for yourself narratively. On one hand, there's a character that is a physical structure. And on the other, the narrative spans two very different eras.

A: Yes sir, it was a challenge. But I love to do hard things. Every time I write a novel, I set out to do something I've never done before. The greatest craft challenge in this story was to get

inside characters and present them realistically even though they're not from the same time. And not just the main characters. There's fiery Tig and ferociously reactionary Nick and everybody in between. That's not new to me. What was new was setting up two different sets of characters in two different centuries and braiding them together to tell one story. There were issues of tone, language, differences in the age. People in the 19th century didn't use contractions as much when they spoke. That might seem stuffy. But that's how it was.

Q: Vines are easily cut back. And they're also persistent. The town and its name proved a crucial part of the character of the novel.

A: It did. (Laughs.) And its history gave me plenty of real drama. I couldn't have made up a better figure than Charles Landis. He stepped in as this bully-pulpit leader, and that's interesting to me how in uncertain times we look for guidance and leadership, but to whom do we cleave during hard times? It was surreal to me to examine that and understand why we turn to tyrants when we're afraid. But he actually shot someone on Main Street. It was almost too terrible to be true.

Q: That's not widespread history. Which reminds me that the broadest-stroke history is all any of us get in school.

A: You bring up an interesting point, which is that so much history gets glossed over. If we want to learn from history, we have to look at it squarely instead of accepting the censored and lionized package that gets handed down. There are examples in Europe, too. Belgium hasn't reckoned with what it did in the Congo. In the United States, we love to lionize heroes and perpetuate myths. In Vineland, they still celebrate Landis with a founder's day. He's like their Uncle Sam. And when the local paper asked me about that, I said that's fine as long as you forget the fact that he walked into the office of an opposing newspaper and shot the editor in the head and got away with it. If I'm unkind saying he's not a great man, well, I'm sorry. He did some forward-thinking things like integrating schools. But my job is to be clear eyed in the research and a good storyteller.

andrew.dansby@chron.com

Barbara Kingsolver's crumbling houses

Michael Magras

Oct. 19, 2018



Literal and figurative foundations are at the center of Barbara Kingsolver's new novel, "Unsheltered."

Photo: Steven Hopp

Ask a building contractor about the foundation of a house, and he'll tell you that it should be made of material strong enough to last for decades, if not centuries.

Build a bad one, and cracks will appear. The edifice you thought sound will be suddenly vulnerable.

Literal and figurative foundations are at the center of Barbara Kingsolver's "Unsheltered" (Harper; 480 pages; \$29.99). In chapters that alternate between the present day and the late 1860s, Kingsolver, ever the astute social commenter, presents two families, both of which are dealing with more than one type of crumbling house.

Each story is set in Vineland, New Jersey, where Willa Knox and her Greek husband, Iano, have moved from their home in Virginia. It's summer 2015, when a man referred to as the Bullhorn is one of 17 Republican presidential candidates.

Willa is the sort of person who "raised her anxiety shield against every family medical checkup or late-night ring of the phone, expecting the worst so life couldn't blindsides them." Lucky for her, as her family faces many challenges. Iano, who has a Ph.D. in global politics, "laboriously blew his first shot at tenure" in Virginia, so they've moved into the decrepit Vineland house they inherited, and Iano has accepted a one-year assignment at a Philadelphia college named Chancel.

The salary and health insurance aren't great, but the family needs them because of Willa's current job status. Her last gig was as science editor at a defunct magazine outside Washington, D.C. Now, she has to freelance as "a regular incentive to get out of sweatpants."

Kingsolver lays out this background information too neatly in a conversation Willa has with a contractor who warns her about the house's "nonexistent foundation" and the expensive repairs it will require.

But the novel quickly gains momentum thereafter. Willa's father-in-law, a man "offended to distraction by the idea of a nonwhite man" as president and clinging to life with the help of an oxygen mask and constant care, lives with them, as does Tig, their adult daughter, who dropped out of college and spent a year in Cuba. She now works as a line cook in a restaurant.

NEW FICTION: Tom Perrotta and the serious comedy of sex

With Tig, Kingsolver shrewdly upends the reader's expectations. Tig may at first seem wayward and unfocused, but it's their older child, Zeke, a Harvard Business School graduate, who's less reliable. Helene, his partner, has killed herself and left him with their infant son. Zeke, however, wants to move to Boston to start a business. He heads north, leaving Willa to care for her grandson while she researches grants that might pay for the house's repairs.

Vineland has had more than a few dilapidated houses in its history. Back in the 1860s, high school science teacher Thatcher Greenwood, along with his young wife and her 12-year-old

sister, moved into a house with roofing issues.

But that's only the start of Thatcher's problems. It's just his luck to have become a science teacher in a town founded by Charles Landis, "land developer and utopian visionary."

"Temperance was crucial to the vision" of Vineland, and the headmaster of the school — a figure some readers might find too cartoonish — isn't open to the lessons Thatcher wants to teach, among them the theories of Charles Darwin.

Inprint Reading with Barbara Kingsolver

What: Barbara Kingsolver with the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

When: Monday, October 22, 2018, 7:30 p.m.

Where: Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston, 4300 University Drive

[Click here to buy tickets and for more information](#)

But Thatcher has supporters, including Mary Treat, the real-life naturalist whose husband left her for "a champion of free love." When Thatcher first visits her at home, she's letting a Venus flytrap nibble her index finger so that she can study their carnivorous properties.

If Treat and Thatcher state their intellectual points too obviously, Treat is nonetheless a great character, encouraging Thatcher and piquing his curiosity when she says that carnivorous plants "have become one of my special projects with Mr. Darwin," with whom she corresponds.

And he's not the only one piqued by a Darwin connection. Willa's grant hunting unearths a prospect that might solve her financial problems: the possibility that Darwin once lived in her house.

NEW NONFICTION: Lawrence Wright can help you understand Texas

Kingsolver sometimes tries too hard to remind us that America's current period of strife is hardly unprecedented, as when Treat tells Thatcher, "When men fear the loss of what they know, they will follow any tyrant who promises to restore the old order."

The comparison of a fractured society being akin to a crumbling house may not be subtle, but it's apt. In its best moments, "Unsheltered" highlights the difficulty of all forms of repair,

whether of one's home or the ripped fabric of society. "Presumptions of a lifetime are perilous things to overturn," Treat says. That was as true in her day as it is now. Not reassuring, perhaps, but that's one foundation that seems to have survived the centuries.

Michael Magras is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. His work has appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and *Newsday*.

[Get the Gray Matters newsletter.](#) It has carnivorous properties.

HEARST *newspapers*

©2018 Hearst

[KUHT TV 8 | Passport](#)

Binge your favorite shows with PBS Passport
Find out how to gain access to extended content on-demand >>

THIS IS WHY YOUR GIFT MATTERS.



HOUSTON MATTERS

Barbara Kingsolver Discusses Her Writing Process and Latest Novel, 'Unsheltered'

The acclaimed author of *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* talks with Houston Public Media's Ernie Manouse.

ABNER FLETCHER | OCTOBER 19, 2018, 1:45 PM

Share



Support Comes From



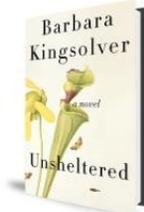
Amazon.com contributes a portion of each purchase to Houston Public Media when you access Amazon through houstonpublicmedia.org/amazon



Share



The works of novelist and poet [Barbara Kingsolver](#) weave themes of social justice and the environment into entertaining stories that have garnered her a variety of awards, and even a selection for [Oprah's Book Club](#). Her works include [The Poisonwood Bible](#), the story of a missionary family in the Congo, and [Animal, Vegetable, Miracle](#), an account of her family's attempt to eat locally.



Her latest novel is called [Unsheltered](#), and it asks the question: How could two hardworking people do everything right in life and still end up destitute? She'll read from the book at a Houston event on Monday, Oct. 22, at [Cullen Performance Hall](#) at the University of Houston.

In the audio above, Kingsolver tells Houston Public Media's [Ernie Manouse](#) about the difference between the sort of literary fiction she writes and what some might consider more disposable, commercial fiction. They also discuss her writing process, and how she develops themes, characters, and language.

RELATED

- Full Show: Gymnastics Arrest, and Crosby ISD's Financial Woes (Oct. 18, 2018)
- Scott Kelly's Photographs Showcase 'Infinite Wonder' of Space
- Author Discusses New Reagan Biography
- Is Dracula A True Story? New Prequel Draws on Bram Stoker's Real Life

MOST VIEWED

- City of Houston Announces Street Closures Due to Trump Rally at Toyota Center
- Husband of Substitute Teacher Killed in Santa Fe High School Shooting Dies
- If Houston's Population Projections Are Correct, Where Are We Going to Put Everyone?
- Is This The End for A Sex Robot Brothel in Houston?
- Check Locations And Hours for Early Voting on Harris County Flood Control Bond Election

Word up: Vote for unity [Editorial]

Oct. 28, 2018 | Updated: Oct. 30, 2018 1:31 p.m.



Most Popular

Following investigation, Houston Chronicle retracts eight stories



Houston voters threw out the bums, and the best, too [Editorial]



How Ted Cruz survived Beto O'Rourke and the Blue Wave



An update from the editor of the Houston Chronicle

Hidalgo, surprise victor in Harris County judge race, prepares to lead



Museum of Fine Arts Houston discovers it owns a Diego Velázquez painting



Republican judges swept out by voters in Harris County election



You're viewing our redesigned article page.

GIVE FEEDBACK

Translator

To read this article in one of Houston's most-spoken languages, click on the button below.

Select Language ▾

If you're feeling a sense of uncertainty these days, an inability to express your concerns as Election Day looms over the horizon, let us encourage you to turn to art.

Specifically, we point you to two writers who have touched Houston in recent days.

Best-selling novelist, [Barbara Kingsolver](#), inspired Houstonians by [reading from her newest book at the Margarett Root Brown Inprint Reading series at University of Houston](#), while news that UH's award-winning poet [Tony Hoagland passed away from cancer](#) left our city grieving.

Art mirrors life, and both writers' work crackles with contemporary political and social commentary on the divisive times we live in.

The title of Kingsolver's novel "Unsheltered" evokes the despair of many roofless Houstonians still struggling to house themselves in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. The work focuses on two families who lived in the same crumbling house in Vineland, N.J.. While the families are separated by centuries, both are wracked by political division and can no longer count on financial stability even though they've done all the right things to prepare for their future.

Troubled times are of course fertile ground to explore the differences between characters who fear change and those who embrace it, and the author trains her biologist's eye on the upheaval caused by the rise of Darwinism in the 1870's strand of the novel and the dread and confusion surrounding climate change in the contemporary chapters.

That uncertainty leaves society ripe for divisive leadership. “When men fear the loss of what they know, they will follow any tyrant who promises to restore the old order,” a character notes of a demagogue in the 19th century thread of the book.

In case anyone misses the contemporary reference, that demagogue murders a journalist on Main Street and — no spoilers here — may or may not get away with it.

Art not only highlights conflict but attempts to help us transcend it by deepening our connection with each other. Kingsolver’s books and Hoagland’s poetry are no exception. Hoagland’s optimism comes through in his recent poem about his illness, “I Have Good News.”

“You will begin to see the plants and flowers of your youth, And they will look as new to you as they did back then, little lavender bouquets arranged in solar systems, delicate beyond your comprehension.”

As powerful as art is, writers can only highlight complex issues, not solve them.

The responsibility for healing our highly fractured country lies with each one of us, and, we have no more powerful voice than our vote.

This election we must seek to vote in leaders who call forth our optimism and our common humanity, who seek to unite us rather than divide us. After all, it's only by coming together and becoming more cognizant of the dangers to community that, as Kingsolver poses, “we can all stand clear in the light of day unsheltered.”



ZEST

Felisha Gray, left, has her photo taken by Richelle Lopez at the Flower Vault, which has a number of floral themes for people to up their Instagram game.

Doing it #ForTheGram

By Maggie Gordon | STAFF WRITER

Houston is home to unique pop-up Instagram factory that capitalizes on collective cultural moment in which taking photos is experience in itself

Felisha Gray doesn't always traipse around Montrose with a Mary Poppins bag brimming with wardrobe changes. But her \$20 ticket into Houston's new Instagram factory, the Flower Vault, buys her only an hour of shutterbug time, and she needs to maximize this opportunity. So as she poses in the "Where's Wallflower" room, where the walls and furniture are upholstered in the same moody, Victorian-inspired fabric, her reinforcements sit in her purse, just outside the frame.

'The value in that is perhaps not the photo itself, but the experience.'

Felisha Gray

Her friend Richelle Lopez snaps furiously on a small camera. Then a phone. The two college students are among a dozen people milling through the space at 10:30 a.m. on a Friday. And though the pair is alone in one of five distinct photo sets constructed inside this Montrose "experience," they are firmly planted in the middle of a broader collective moment. To borrow a hashtag from Instagram, they, along with others, are doing it #ForTheGram.

When Instagram launched at the end of 2010, it counted 25,000 users by the end of its first day. In a year, that grew to 14 million people, posting 400 million photos and earning it the designation of

Instagram continues on G7



Photos by Melissa Phillip / Staff photographer

Meredith Arthur holds her 12-week-old daughter, Julie Arthur, while her friend Erin Clayton snaps pictures at the Flower Vault, 1735 Westheimer.

Inprint presents Jonathan Lethem

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday
Where: Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston, 4300 University
Details: \$5; 713-521-2026, inprintheouston.org



Adrian Cook

Jonathan Lethem's latest is "The Feral Detective."

BOOK

Lethem returns to gumshoe genre

By Andrew Dansby
 STAFF WRITER

One of the -isms of creative writing classes is to write what you know. Another that gets taught is to write what you hate. Jonathan Lethem has for years avoided both, at least in part. He made his bones nearly 25 years ago with "Gun, With Occasional Music," in which Lethem took what he knew well – the

hard-boiled detective novel – and spun it to the outskirts of imagination in a Philip K. Dick-ensian future with talking kangaroos and toddlers bearing advanced intelligence and cynical inclinations. If that sounds odd, just check out Lethem's idea of romance involving a particle collider in "As She Climbs Across the Table," which was published in 1997.

Lethem at 54 has assembled a remarkable body of work that extends well beyond his II novels.

Lethem continues on G11

ZEST

LETHEM

From page G1

He's a probing essayist, and from time to time he delves deeply into music, having done great work for Rolling Stone on James Brown and Bob Dylan. His short book on the Talking Heads' "Fear of Music" is among the best in the album-centric 33½ series. His work earned him a spot as the Roy E. Disney professor of creative writing at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., succeeding the late David Foster Wallace.

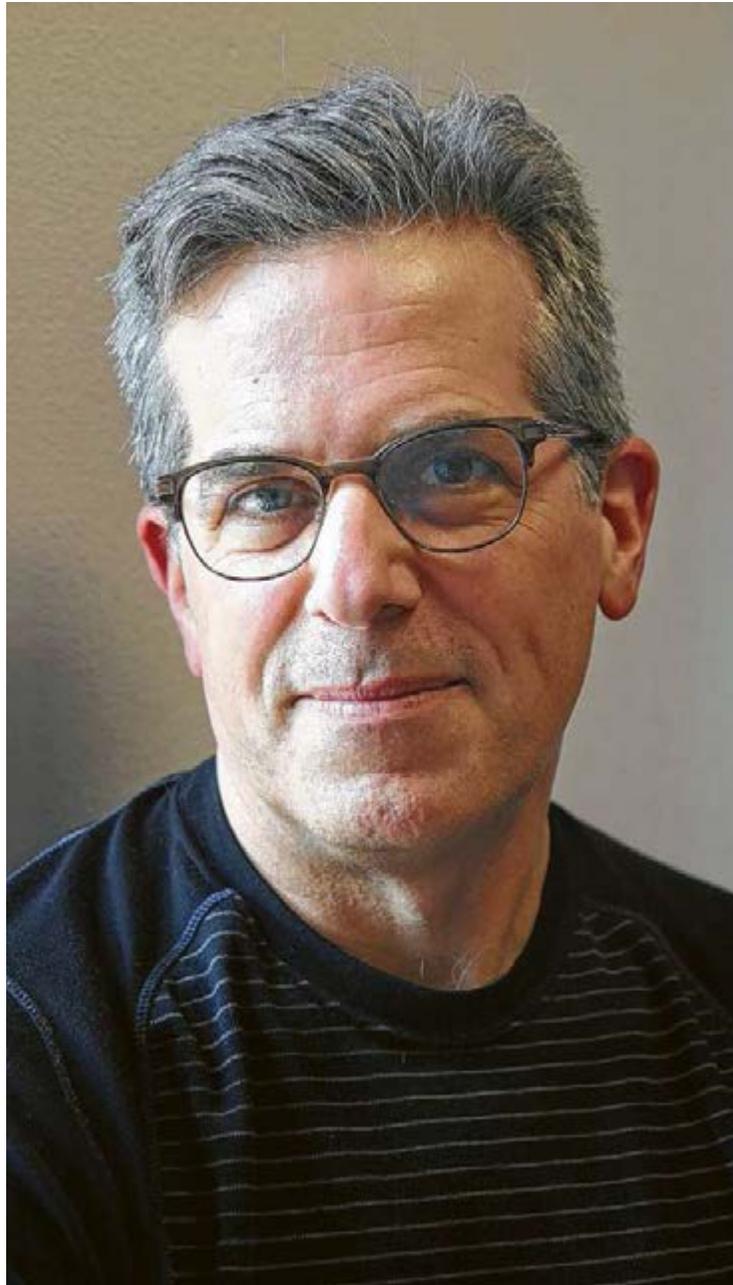
His 11th novel is the new "The Feral Detective," in which Lethem returns to the gumshoe genre for the first time since his breakthrough book, "Motherless Brooklyn," nearly a decade ago. Lethem was kicking around ideas for a desert detective book when the 2016 election happened. With the election results in mind, he decided to write what he hated. In doing so, he created Phoebe Siegler.

Phoebe was a New York Times editor until she walked off the job when the paper's editorial board met with "the Beast-Elect" in November 2016. Her sense of self rattled by the election, Phoebe goes west to try to track down the daughter of a friend who went missing in California. She meets a raggedy detective and dives into the jagged topography of California's Inland Empire, where some communities designed as utopias have degraded into ragtag tribes in conflict. Lethem's affinity for music means the late songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen, who spent time at a Buddhist retreat in that region, is a sort of unofficial spirit in the book.

Lethem will read from "The Feral Detective" as part of In-Print's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Monday, and will be on hand Sunday for "Lethem," a film about his life and work being screened as part of the Cinema Arts Festival.

Q: Your review of "2666" is what tipped me off to Roberto Bolano's work. And when I first picked your book up, I couldn't help but think of his "The Savage Detectives," which is weird because the books don't really share much thematic content. But the titles hit a similar tone.

A: It's funny, I hadn't thought of that at all until someone came to me and said the title echoed "The Savage Detectives." But yes, I love Bolano, and discovering his books was a revelation for me. I guess the book of mine that was most sparked by the feeling from his, that liberating power in the way he let himself write, was "Chronic City," which is a few back now. But I like the



Amy Maloof

"I was conceiving a desert novel and then found myself thinking about that end-of-an-empire novel," Jonathan Lethem says of writing "The Feral Detective."

association, even if it's accidental. I may not even recognize his influence. He's one of those lights in the sky for me.

Q: Am I correct in thinking you'd been developing a detective novel set in the desert, but the 2016 election narrowed your focus?

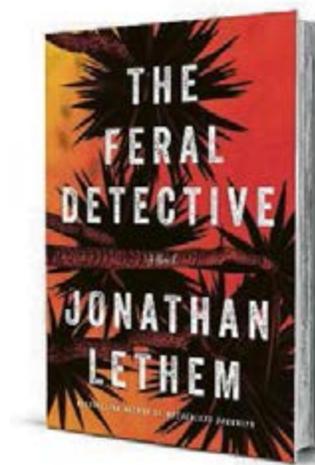
A: Yeah, I had a lot of notions floating around to start a book somewhat like this one. Then the election happened, and it cut the ground underneath my writing activities and exposed some sense of futility in various pursuits. For a time, I felt like there was no point in writing this book or any other book. But then I started to reconceive things rapidly. I saw acutely all this crap about dynamics between men and women that were sublimated by Trump, this underbelly of daily life. So these grievances that seemed eternal felt fresh again. It felt like declaring an emergency situation, even if I recognized the emergency started thousands of years earlier.

Q: An excerpt from Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges to open the book certainly sets some expectations. Tribalism, labyrinthine experiences, violence. Safe to say we're meant to apply that to the present?

A: Yeah, he's very good at evoking mythic archetypal elements in human dealings. "Brodie's Report" is a satirical story that builds on something, kind of like "Gulliver's Travels." It's this report from the frontier of the human reality zone. How these Yahoos in this violent nation are living. And we get a lot of those reports now, before and after Trump was elected.

Q: Issues of identity play into it, which also feels influenced by Borges. There's a Phoebe line, "I dragged you into this to find a real lost living girl, a young woman." Then she adds, "I didn't mean myself."

A: Well, the idea of rescue ... not rescue but the capacity to take care of a single other hu-



'Lethem'

A film about the author's life and work

When: 4 p.m. Sunday

Where: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet

Details: \$12; 832-487-7071, cinemahtx.com

man individual is something I've been thinking about for a long time. It's in "Fortress of Solitude" and "Motherless Brooklyn," where the boys are rounded up and made into this fake family by a mob figure. So both Phoebe and (detective) Heist imagine ways out of the problems in their own lives by being rescuers. In the classic detective story, the search is always secretly for the self. That's where Marlowe ends up, finding out about himself, in "The Long Goodbye." That theme is almost always contained in the hard-boiled form, as much as the trench coats.

Q: There was an interesting conflict in the setting. I feel like it was an empire-in-decline novel. But it's also a book about entering the desert. The setting dramatically contrasts with your previous detective novels, which were more urban.

A: Yes, I was conceiving a desert novel and then found myself thinking about that end-of-an-empire novel. So the use of space became more and more vivid to me, well before the election. I began to write about this environment and was figuring out a lot of the book in some ways, triangulating the low lands up to Mount Baldy.

Q: Not to belabor a point, but on one hand, the Inland Empire in California is not too far from where you live. Which makes it a readily accessible place to research. But I feel like that name alone was tempting, too, for an empire within an empire, both in decline.

A: Yeah, it's this thing that's hiding in plain sight, this reality. It's undescribed, but if you drive through it you see the endless

burbs and strip-mall shopping centers, and it's all so inert. There's no difference from one town to the next. But when you start to get off the freeway and onto the ground, you get to know it. It's peculiar, and it's not L.A. It's very middle American, both the edge of this frontier and California at the same time. It's like a utopia and a dystopia together like nesting dolls. But it's full of people struggling terribly, and people coming to terms with ideals that have dried up.

Q: For the longest time, going west was this metaphor for possibility.

A: And the logic of western expansion finds its paradoxical limit here in the Pacific Ocean. But also at some point, you have to set up shop somewhere. So there were these official utopian spaces, these crazy intentional communities. Radical experiments for communities. But the time has come to call the bluff on the western imperative to light off to another territory.

Q: You have a book out, something you've done time and again. But there's also a film about you that screens this weekend. Many writers enjoy the shield of anonymity of the printed page. Is it weird being on film?

A: Ah, yes, the thing. The Lethem film thing. It is strange to have someone make a movie about you. But it's also really sweet. The parts I like best are the ones that aren't about me. My brother, who's an artist, and my friend, who's brilliantly funny. Some of the footage where you take me out of it. It would've been fine if I wasn't in there at all, but I couldn't persuade them to do that. So I have to deal with the fact that my fat face is in there. But it's not like it's opening in theaters everywhere. So for one night in Houston, I'll feel a little exposed. But it is an alien feeling for a writer. You usually put yourself behind ... you hide behind other stuff. Characters and this idea of a displaced self. This is different.

Q: "Feral Detective" went from idea to novel pretty quickly. Are you in resting mode? Or have you thought about the next thing?

A: I'm pretty well into another book, and actually it's totally different and going really well. I don't want to talk about it too much yet. But it's set in another world entirely, a post-apocalyptic story set in Maine.

Q: Like the Leonard Cohen song: "You want it darker?" I guess the answer is "yes."

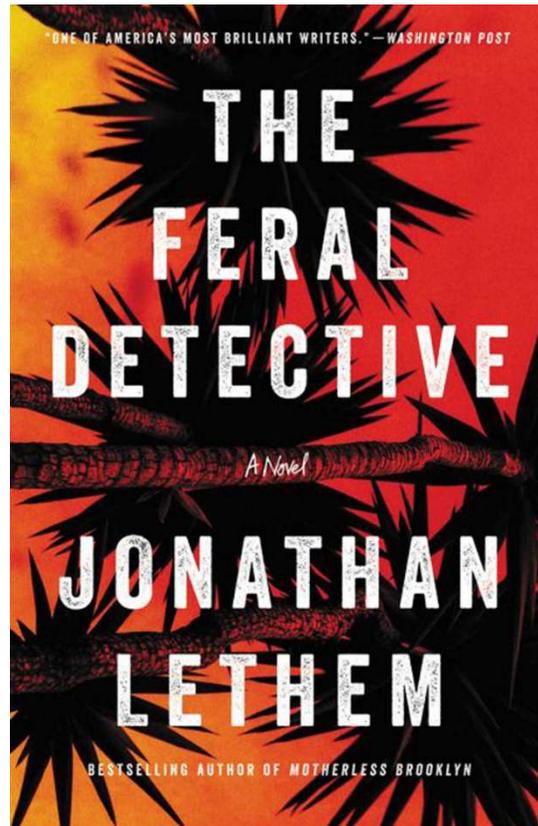
A: Yes.

andrew.dansby@chron.com

In 'The Feral Detective' Jonathan Lethem returns to the gumshoe genre

Andrew Dansby

Nov. 9, 2018 | Updated: Nov. 9, 2018 8:23 a.m.



"The Feral Detective" by Jonathan Lethem; Ecco (326 pages, \$26.99). (HarperCollins Publishers)

Photo: HarperCollins Publishers, HO / TNS

One of the isms of creative writing classes is to write what you know. Another that gets taught is to write what you hate. Jonathan Lethem has for years avoided both, at least in part. He made his bones nearly 25 years ago with "Gun, With Occasional Music," where Lethem took what he knew well — the hard-boiled detective novel — and spun it to the outskirts of imagination in a Philip K. Dick-ensian future with talking kangaroos and toddlers bearing advanced intelligence and cynical inclinations.

If that sounds odd, just check out Lethem's idea of romance involving a particle collider in "As She Climbs Across the Table," which was published in 1997.

Lethem at 54 has assembled a remarkable body of work that extends well beyond his 11 novels. He's a probing essayist, and from time to time he delves deeply into music, having done great work for Rolling Stone on James Brown and Bob Dylan. His short book on the Talking Heads' "Fear of Music" is among the best in the album-centric 33 1/3 series. His work earned him a spot as the Roy E. Disney professor of creative writing at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., succeeding the late David Foster Wallace.

Inprint presents Jonathan Lethem and Gary Shteyngart

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday

Where: Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston, 4300 University

Details: \$5; 713-521-2026, inprinthouston.org

"Lethem"

When: 4 p.m. Sunday

Where: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1001 Bissonnet

Details: \$12; 832-487-7071, cinemahtx.com

His 11th novel is the new "The Feral Detective," in which Lethem returns to the gumshoe genre for the first time since his big breakthrough book, "Motherless Brooklyn," nearly a decade ago. Lethem was kicking around ideas for a desert detective book when the 2016 election happened. With the election results in mind, he decided to write what he hated. In doing so he created Phoebe Siegler.

Phoebe was a New York Times editor until she walked off the job when the paper's editorial board met with "the Beast-Elect" in November 2016. Her sense of self rattled by the election, Phoebe goes west to try to track down the daughter of a friend who went missing in California. She meets a raggedy detective and dives into the jagged topography of California's Inland Empire, where some communities designed as utopias have degraded into ragtag tribes in conflict. Lethem's affinity for music means the late songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen, who spent time at a Buddhist retreat in that region, is a sort of unofficial spirit in the book.

Lethem will read from "The Feral Detective" as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Monday, as well as being on hand Sunday for "Lethem," a film about his life and work being screened as part of the Cinema Arts Festival.

Q: Your review of "2666" is what tipped me off to Roberto Bolano's work. And when I first picked your book up, I couldn't help but think of his "The Savage Detectives," which is weird because the books don't really share much thematic content. But the titles hit a similar tone.

A: It's funny, I hadn't thought of that at all until someone came to me and said the title echoed "The Savage Detectives." But yes, I love Bolano, and discovering his books was a revelation for me. I guess the book of mine that was most sparked by the feeling from his, that liberating power in the way he let himself write, was "Chronic City," which is a few back now. But I like the association, even if it's accidental. I may not even recognize his influence. He's one of those lights in the sky for me.

Q: Am I correct in thinking you'd been developing a detective novel set in the desert. But the 2016 election narrowed your focus.

A: Yeah, I had a lot of notions floating around to start a book somewhat like this one. Then the election happened, and it cut the ground underneath my writing activities, and exposed some sense of futility in various pursuits. For a time I felt like there was no point in writing this book or any other book. But then I started to reconceive things rapidly. I saw acutely all this crap about dynamics between men and women that were sublimated by Trump, this underbelly of daily life. So these grievances that seemed eternal felt fresh again. It felt like declaring an emergency situation, even if I recognized the emergency started thousands of years earlier.

Q: An excerpt from Borges to open the book certainly sets some expectations. Tribalism, labyrinthine experiences, violence. Safe to say we're meant to apply that to the present?

A: Yeah, yeah, he's very good at evoking mythic archetypal elements in human dealings. "Brodie's Report" is a satirical story that builds on something, kind of like "Gulliver's Travels." It's this report from the frontier of the human reality zone. How these Yahoos in this violent nation are living. And we get a lot of those reports now, before and after Trump was elected.

Q: Issues of identity play into it, which also feels influenced by Borges. There's a Phoebe line, "I dragged you into this to find a real lost living girl, a young woman.' Then she adds, "I didn't mean myself."

A: Well, the idea of rescue . . . not rescue, but the capacity to take care of a single other human individual is something I've been thinking about for a long time. It's in "Fortress of Solitude" and "Motherless Brooklyn," where the boys are rounded up and made into this fake family by a mob figure. So both Phoebe and Heist imagine ways out of the problems in their own lives by being rescuers. In the classic detective story, the search is always secretly for the self. That's where Marlowe ends up, finding out about himself, in "The Long Goodbye." That theme is almost always contained in the hard-boiled form, as much as the trench coats.

Q: There was an interesting conflict in the setting. I feel like it was an empire-in-decline novel. But it's also a book about entering the desert. The setting dramatically contrasts your previous detective novels, which were more urban.

A: Yes, I was conceiving a desert novel and then found myself thinking about that end-of-an-empire novel. So the use of space became more and more vivid to me, well before the election. I began to write about this environment and was figuring out a lot of the book in some ways, triangulating the low lands up to Mount Baldy.

Q: Not to belabor a point, but on one hand, the Inland Empire in California is not too far from where you live. Which makes it a readily accessible place to research. But I feel like that name alone was tempting, too, for an empire within an empire, both in decline.

A: Yeah, it's this thing that's hiding in plain sight, this reality. It's undescribed, but if you drive through it you see the endless burbs and strip mall shopping centers and it's all so inert. There's no difference from one town to the next. But when you start to get off the freeway and onto the ground you get to know it.

It's peculiar and it's not L.A. It's very middle American, both the edge of this frontier and California at the same time. It's like a utopia and a dystopia together like nesting dolls. But it's full of people struggling terribly, and people coming to terms with ideals that have dried up.

Q: For the longest time going west was this metaphor for possibility.

A: And the logic of western expansion finds its paradoxical limit here in the Pacific Ocean. But also at some point you have to set up shop somewhere. So there were these official utopian spaces, these crazy intentional communities. Radical experiments for communities. But the time has come to call the bluff on the western imperative to light off to another territory.

Q: You have a book out, which is something you've done time and again. But there's also a film about you that screens this weekend. Many writers enjoy the shield of anonymity of the printed page. Is it weird being on film?

A: Ah, yes, the thing. The Lethem film thing. It IS strange to have someone make a movie about you. But it's also really sweet. The parts I like best are the ones that aren't about me. My brother, who's an artist, and my friend, who's brilliantly funny. Some of the footage where you take me out of it. It would've been fine if I wasn't in there at all, but I couldn't persuade them to do that. So I have to deal with the fact that my fat face is in there. But it's not like it's opening in theaters everywhere. So for one night in Houston, I'll feel a little exposed. But it is an alien feeling for a writer. You usually put yourself behind . . . you hide behind other stuff. Characters and this idea of a displaced self. This is different.

Q: "Feral Detective" went from idea to novel pretty quickly. Are you in resting mode? Or have you thought about the next thing?

A: I'm pretty well into another book, and actually it's totally different and going really well. I don't want to talk about it too much yet. But it's set in another world entirely, a post-apocalyptic story set in Maine.

Q: Like the Leonard Cohen song: "You want it darker?" I guess the answer is "yes."

A: Yes.

andrew.dansby@chron.com

ADVERTISEMENT



Arts & Culture > Books & Talks

WHAT NOT TO 'WEAR'

Jonathan Lethem on America, Robert Mitchum, and Very Bad Interviews

The author of *The Feral Detective* chats ahead of his Houston appearance.

By [Ryan Pait](#) • 11/7/2018 at 11:30am

32

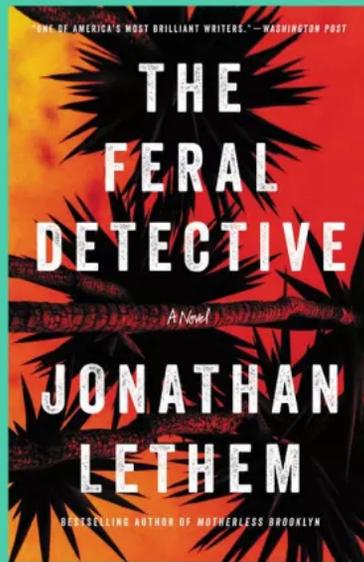


IMAGE: [COURTESY OF HARPERCOLLINS](#)

IN JONATHAN LETHEM'S NEWEST NOVEL—touted as his first detective novel since 1999's *Motherless Brooklyn*—a young woman named Phoebe Siegler abandons her metropolitan media career to go on the hunt for a friend's daughter in the Wild West.

She enlists the help of Charles Heist, the feral detective himself. The two become embroiled in a conflict between two warring factions called the Bears and the Rabbits, and Phoebe must reckon with her frustrations over Donald Trump's impending inauguration and her burgeoning feelings for Heist.

On Monday, November 12, Lethem will headline the third evening of Inprint's 2018–2019 Margaret Root Brown Reading Series with Gary Shteyngart. We caught up with Lethem to talk about hologram Robert Mitchum, audiobook narrators, and election mania before he visits Houston.

Charles Heist seems like the sort of character that Joan Didion would've profiled back in her *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* days.

(Laughs.) I love that!

He's so that type of person, and at one point Phoebe actually name-checks Didion, which made me happy. What inspired Charles Heist?

Oh boy. There's layers and layers of references that I could cite. One baseline condition is that I've always been interested in the image of the feral child and ferality as an idea. It's really specific, but also really elastic and strange because it encompasses superheroic figures like Tarzan and Mowgli, as well as victimized children who are kept in closets and denied the experience of language or social culture.

I've also made no secret of the fact that I'm into cowboys in a kind of embarrassing way. I like large westerns, I like John Wayne—but I also find him horrible at the same time. I grew up on the East Coast, and for a long time, that was just an archetype or an image: John Wayne striding through Monument Valley, this craggy, hairy man in open space. What did that mean? What was that all about? As I got older, I realized that this was an allegorical figure that was saying something about the idea of America, about freedom and the frontier and what it meant to seize control of this land and “civilize” it. And it was often men of violence and men of genocide that were “civilizing” it, making it what we see today.

Heist comes out of this thinking about the West, and the cowboy, and that image: the hardboiled detective as a cowboy or knight in the urban frontier. And then again, he's like a joke. A joke about the Marlboro Man, or Clint Eastwood. There's a joke early on where Phoebe lays eyes on him and is like, “Finally I see what Meryl might've seen in Clint. It never made sense to me before.” But I think that Heist is kind of a cipher—the book is puzzling over him. Phoebe is trying to figure out what she feels about him, and she's doing that work on behalf of the reader and behalf of myself.

The book is set during a very specific period of time—Phoebe feels unmoored by Donald Trump's election and his inauguration. Was the setting something you had in mind from the get-go, or something that developed over time?

I was just going to write the book in a more or less timeless present. I didn't have any interest in anchoring it to cultural events when I was conceiving it. And then the election came along and just sort of kicked me sideways, like it did to so many of us. My way of coping was to just throw it into the book and see what that looked like. I was afraid that nothing would make sense anymore. So I decided to just set the book during the time period when I was writing, to set it during the inauguration and see what happens.

It works for Phoebe as a motivation. You understand why she's spiraling out so much, and then it's funny when she gets caught up in current events when she's in a stressful moment. Like when she's in

the middle of all the violent drama halfway through the book and yells at everyone and says, “DID YOU F*ERS EVEN VOTE?”**

(Laughs.) Yeah. In a way, the book was accidentally about that stuff even before it happened. I was thinking about this condition of going off the grid and the idea that the American reality was unbearable, and that you would look for an exit door. The whole thing about Phoebe asking people who they voted for—she’s actually asking people who don’t consider that a very urgent question. They might not even be aware that there was an election. For her, that’s stunning to consider. The search for another frontier hiding inside the American desert, another place to reinvent society—that desire isn’t born in a vacuum. It’s born out of a sense that we’ve exhausted the present American reality.

I saw before I started reading the book that Zosia Mamet narrates the audiobook version, and it was so easy for me to picture her as Phoebe while I read. Did you get any say in picking the audiobook narrator?

There’s an interesting backstory. Because Edward Norton is filming *Motherless Brooklyn* and my publisher wanted to associate the two books and because I have access to Norton, they were like, “Will you ask him to do it?” And I thought that would be pretty great. So we tried, but Norton is editing the movie right now and is deep in the editorial suite every day for 10 hours, and he just couldn’t do it by when they needed it to be done. So then my publisher asked what our fallback position was, and I said it should really be a woman. We started throwing names around, and Zosia’s name came into it really quickly. I thought that would be incredible, and she would be fantastic. And she gratified our fantasy on that. It was just very lucky.

I was just picturing Shoshanna from *Girls* going on a bender, and it was great. Thinking along those same lines, who could be a great Charles Heist?

I’m bad at this game because I’m so engaged with old movies. I always think of dead people instead of viable actors who are the right age. Robert Mitchum? I’d love to see Robert Mitchum at the age he was when he did *Night of the Hunter* as Heist. But who would be him now? Who do you have?

I kind of felt like it should be a British actor doing an American accent, but I also really like the idea of it being hologram Robert Mitchum.

That would be good! It probably should be some really genteel actor who’s getting roughed up—that would be kind of fun, seeing someone do the guttural thing. The other way to go is someone who could do a semi-autistic He-Man who’s good to look at. There’s a part of the character in which he can’t really talk. I keep coming up with a steady stream of people who I’m sure the people in the Hollywood casting game would say, “He would’ve been good 20 years ago.” I’ve lost his name—but the dude who plays Strider in *Lord of the Rings*.

Viggo Mortensen! Yeah.

Viggo Mortensen! He would’ve been good. He’s got that little scar on his face. He would be perfect. I’m sure a Hollywood casting agent would be like, “You’re too late for Viggo Mortensen.” They’d want someone younger.

Phoebe says that part of her job at NPR was “prepping the one-sheets that made interviewers sound like they’d read books they hadn’t read,” which made me laugh.

Yeah... (Laughs.) You get interviewed enough, and you know the difference. And a lot of radio hosts are very, very good at what they do. But they do it at a rate that pretty much ensures that they’re going to be working from a tip sheet.

So after reading that, my question was: What's the worst interview you've ever had about one of your books?

Well, I'll tell a story that's sort of unfair because it involves translation problems. One of the interesting things that happens on book tour is that you go to Europe and find yourself answerable for American reality. So you're asked big questions about the president, current events, and it leads you into some strange situations.

I happened to be in Italy on tour very shortly after 9/11. It was intense. Everyone was feeling for New York and America in a very different way. I lived through 9/11 in relatively intimate proximity. It was something I was talking about quite a bit. There was a live radio interview, and you're always nervous about going live on the radio in another country, because what if there are translation issues? But the people who were getting me set up said the host was a superstar, and her English was great—there'd be no need for simultaneous translation or interpretation. She would ask me questions in English, and I'd answer, and they'd take it from there.

So I relaxed and the red light blinked, and the woman's first question was, and this is verbatim, "What did you wear on 9/11?" And I froze! She wants to know what I was wearing on 9/11? I don't know! And there was this dead air. And then she heard herself and caught her mistake and said, "Where were you on 9/11?" (Laughs.) I came really close to trying to describe what I was wearing on 9/11 live on Italian radio. That was the worst moment.

Jonathan Lethem/Gary Shteyngart, Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Tickets \$5. Cullen Performance Hall, 4300 University Dr. 713-521-2026. More info and tickets at inprinthouston.org.

Filed under

[Authors](#), [Books](#), [Readings](#), [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series](#), [Inprint](#)

Show Comments

Popular Content



MIDTERMS 2018

Where to Watch the Election Results



Here's Where Your Vote Gets You Free, Discounted Food on Election Day



OPENINGS

Behind the Scenes at the Menil Drawing Institute



SPONSORED CONTENT

The 2018 Illumine Gala Was a Simply AAMazing Affair



SPONSORED

Rice Roots, Global Reach: Professional Master's Programs at Rice University

Presented by Rice University - School of Social Sciences Graduate Program

ADVERTISEMENT



Arts & Culture > Books & Talks

BEGINNINGS OF A SOUL

Gary Shteyngart Marvels at the 'Obliviousness' of the Powerful

We talk with the author about *Lake Success*, his newest novel inescapably molded by today's political moment.

By [Ryan Pait](#) • 11/9/2018 at 7:00am

1

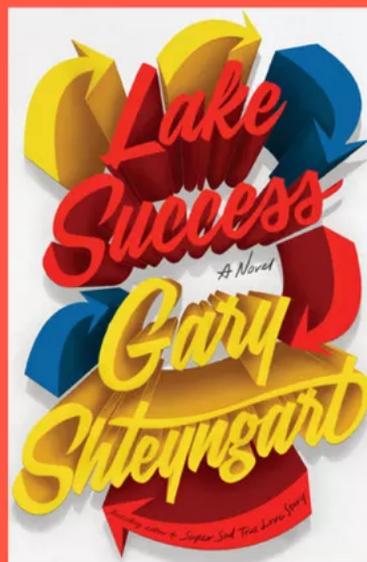


IMAGE: [COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE](#)

GARY SHTEYNGART'S LAKE SUCCESS begins when hedge fund manager Barry Cohen gets caught up on an off-hand comment from his wife, Seema: He doesn't have imagination or soul. Barry spirals out, leaving Seema and his son Shiva behind and setting out on a journey across the country, largely by Greyhound bus. (It's a journey that Shteyngart himself undertook to research the book—Greyhound gets a thank you in the acknowledgments.) Keen on proving Seema wrong, Barry decides he's going to write his

story, which he imagines as “*On the Road* but in thoughtful middle-aged prose.” What follows is a tale of disastrous and sometimes lovely self-reinvention.

On Monday, Shteyngart will headline the third evening of Inprint’s 2018–2019 Margaret Root Brown Reading Series with Jonathan Lethem. We talked to Shteyngart about *Lake Success* and how Donald Trump barged into his book; you can read our conversation with Lethem [here](#).

Barry, early on in his process of running away, thinks to himself that, “It wasn’t America that needed to be made great again, it was her listless citizens.” Barry is thinking this prior to the 2016 election. Do you think that listlessness has gotten better or worse since then?

The listlessness, I think, has turned into sheer terror on the overwhelming part of the population. Our attention has been captured. Everyone is paying very close attention, whether they like Trump or not. It definitely feels like the fate of our country is at stake now—and in the next two years. We’re all at the edge of our seats, watching this ridiculous reality show unfold. When I started my bus ride in June of 2016, I just thought this would be a passing thing. But by the time I got off the bus in San Diego in September, I was looking for Toronto real estate. So there’s definitely been a huge shift.

Trying to capture that in the novel was very hard, because you write several drafts, and it takes nine months to get it out there. There’s no present left in America anymore. We’re all living in the future all the time.

The election of Donald Trump is integral to the plot of the book. How would this book look different if Hillary Clinton was elected?

Here’s the thing: Trump kind of barged into this book in a way that I really hadn’t intended when I started writing it. I really did think that he was going to be one of those markers—you plant something to indicate the era that it’s set in: in the ’50s you’ll have a Cadillac with tail fins, in the ’80s you’d have a Rubik’s Cube. With the 2000s, there’d be this joke about Trump running. But the whole Trump model is based on him elbowing his way into everything in a big way. And it’s sad, in a sense. It takes away from the ability of the writer or the novelist to write about family because in a very authoritarian way, Trump wants to be a part of every conversation. So he is in the book. But except for the ending, he just kind of pops up like a Whack-A-Mole.

But the book is really about a family. I intended to write what it was like to be a hedge fund manager or married to a hedge fund manager, to have all this money and not very much happiness as a family. That was the original subject. But there’s no way to write about 2016 without reaching the conclusion that I did.

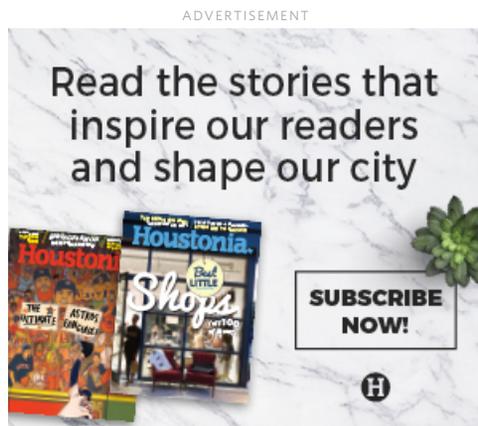
I was thinking about it as I got to the end of the book and didn’t know how you could’ve written it and left the election out—it would’ve felt like a glaring omission. It definitely affects the book because Barry has to reckon with his own behavior in the wake of it.

Yes! And I think what Trump and all this other stuff around Trump has done is that it has made powerful people have to reckon with who they are a little bit more. Not enough, obviously. The #MeToo movement falls into that category, too. Barry’s obliviousness is challenged by the end of the book, and Trump’s ascent helps to challenge it.

I was really struck by Barry deciding to write about what happened to him, and he’s basically trying to write the beginning of this book. And he’s crossing out parts—parts about the nanny, parts about Shiva being autistic. But he ultimately gives up writing the book, because he’s Barry.

He does give up on writing the book. The book he would end up writing would be like the Instagram version—all the stuff that doesn’t make a perfect world is crossed out. All the past is erased. Everything is achieved through a filter. At the end of the book,

Barry is realizing that to write a true story of himself would be to admit that he's not a good father, not a good husband, and in some ways, not a good person or a good citizen.



Barry's former flame Layla bugs him about the short story he wrote about her when they were in college, and Barry asks if he's "going to be persecuted by seven pages of fiction" for his entire life. Do you ever feel that way with anything you've written?

(Laughs.) I don't know. You can hold up almost any book written in the '50s and say, "Oh my God, I can't believe these people are saying *that* about *blank*." Views have changed so dramatically. But we're also in a time where our own views are changing dramatically, minute-by-minute almost. And a book like *Absurdistan* is completely out there. Every horrible thing that could happen, every horrible thing that someone could say about someone else is sort of in that book. It's set in the former Soviet Union, and there's a certain kind of over-the-topness. Would I write that book today? It's a good question. And I have no idea. But things are moving so fast—sometimes for the better, and sometimes not for the better.

You're known for being the king of blurbing books. Who would your ideal blurb be from, and what would it say?

Oh, probably the ghost of Chekhov. And the blurb would be something like, "He's more than just a funny guy—he has the beginnings of a soul."

Jonathan Lethem/Gary Shteyngart, *Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series*. Tickets \$5. Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston, 4300 University Dr. 713-521-2026. More information at inprinthouston.org.

Filed under

[Books](#), [Readings](#), [Authors](#), [Inprint](#), [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series](#)

Popular Content



MIDTERMS 2018

Where to Watch the Election Results



Here's Where Your Vote Gets You Free, Discounted Food on Election Day



OPENINGS

Behind the Scenes at the Menil Drawing Institute



SPONSORED CONTENT

The 2018 Illumine Gala Was a Simply AAMAZing Affair

Q&A

Work with unaccompanied minors informs 'Lost Children Archive'

By Yvette Benavides
CONTRIBUTOR

Valeria Luiselli's 2017 book "Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions" is an account of the author's time working as an immigration courtroom interpreter in New York.

Preoccupied with the border surge that occurred in 2014 and perplexed by the plight of unaccompanied children — some 80,000 made the perilous journey from the violence and despair of their home countries in Central America — Luiselli responded by integrating herself into the dangerous and desperate circumstances of these young people, translating the intake questions for them and hearing their stories.

She continues sharing immigration stories with her latest book, the novel "Lost Children Archive." This is a story of a blended family on a road trip in America, with the immigration crisis as a looming and vexing part of life. The protagonist, a mother of two in a failing relationship, confronts the realities of an unimaginable problem that colors her work, her home life, her marriage and even her children.

In a phone interview while on her book tour, which made a recent stop in Houston, Luiselli shared her insights on the immigration crisis and bearing witness through her writing. The conversation has been edited for space.

Q: The title of your book is "Lost Children Archive." How is it that we have come to a place where this title inspires, of course, dread, but also, somehow, a feeling of something familiar and ordinary. Are we getting complacent about the shock and horrors of these events happening along the border?

A: It's been something that has been on my mind and going on in the borderlands of this country for a long while now.

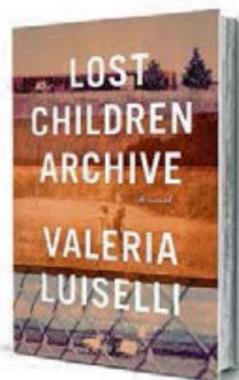
Although it was a situation that made it to headlines and was paid attention to in the summer of 2014, when there was surge of arrivals of undocumented children traveling alone, it then kind of left the space of deeper discussion altogether and only now has come back because the situation is much more violent toward children and families with the Trump administration. So I mean, it's a reality that is not new.

I don't think we ... I mean,



Devin Yalkin / New York Times

Valeria Luiselli's latest novel, "Lost Children Archive," is about an unhappily married couple who set out on a road trip, with their two young children, to visit the ancestral homeland of the Apaches in Arizona.



'Lost Children Archive'

By Valeria Luiselli
Knopf

383 pages, \$27.95

it depends who the "we" is ... that people have become necessarily less sensitive to this particular situation. I think that people that were attentive to the development of this have been looking at it and worried and also, I should say, involved.

So I don't think that on the side of civil society, this is a situation that is more and more outside the scope of our worries, but it is obviously one that this administration has transformed into a deeper humanitarian crisis.

Q: "Tell Me How It Ends"

the crisis ... I also became more and more enraged politically, and I started using the novel as a space in which I was dumping my political rage and frustration and also as a space to explain the deeper roots of this crisis. I'd been going back to American interventionism in Central America in the '70s before the civil wars there.

At some point, luckily, I realized that I was really messing the novel up by trying to stuff it with all of this, and I was also not doing justice to the issue itself by trying to fictionalize it. So I stopped writing the novel and I wrote "Tell Me How It Ends," which is a very straightforward linear account of both the American immigration system and the situation from which children were fleeing and are still fleeing Central America.

Once I wrote "Tell Me How It Ends," I was able to return to the novel with a very different spirit and then use the novel as a space, not directly for my politics and for my own witnessing of the crisis, but more as a space for reflecting on how to think about political violence and political crises.

Q: What did you find about the reasons people want to come to the United States? To traverse those hundreds of miles, to set foot on this inhospitable land?

A: People have no choice when they decide. I mean, it's choosing death not to leave. When they have been threatened by gangs or they have seen family members and friends die at the hands of gang members who continue to (act) with absolute impunity because there's a systemic problem where the police are involved and government actors are involved.

We're not talking about like violence in the neighborhood because there's a violent gang that's threatening some people. We're talking about an entire system that is threatening people's lives and killing them and, in the case particularly of children, recruiting them forcibly, and in the case of women, it's related to sexual violence as well.

It's a journey that people make, not because they want to come here and make a better life or follow the American dream and what used to be thought of as migration to the U.S. We're talking about a diaspora of people who are fleeing because they have no choice.

Yvette Benavides is a professor of English and creative writing at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio.

and "Lost Children Archive" are like conjoined fraternal twins. The novel is like a fictionalized account of the earlier work. Was that deliberate?

A: The relationship between those two books is actually not chronological and linear. It's much more complex. The novel is not a fictionalization of the crisis at the border. The novel is not even about immigration; I think it's a novel with immigration.

I started writing it in 2014, and as I became more and more deeply involved with

'So I don't think that on the side of civil society, this is a situation that is more and more outside the scope of our worries, but it is obviously one that this administration has transformed into a deeper humanitarian crisis.'

HOUSTON MATTERS

‘Lost Children Archive’ Is A Meditation On Family, And Children Detained At The Border

Writer Valeria Luiselli talks about her latest novel ahead of a Feb. 26 Houston event.

MICHAEL HAGERTY | FEBRUARY 21, 2019, 2:20 PM

Share



Ivan Pierre Aguirre/AP

Migrant teens held inside the Tornillo detention camp in 2018.

 [Listen](#) 00:00 /13:18

In 2014, there was a flood of unaccompanied children arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. Most of the thousands detained there were from Central America.

Share



Writer [Valeria Luiselli](#) has a new book addressing that situation – her second book, in fact, that touches on the issue.

Her previous book, [Tell Me How It Ends](#), was a non-fiction account of unaccompanied migrant children detained at the border inspired, in part, by her own time volunteering to translate and advocate for those children.

This new book, [Lost Children Archive](#), is a novel. And, in some ways, it mirrors the very real road trip Luiselli and her family took from the northeast down to the border several years ago.

Mainly, it includes a family going through some issues as they make a similar trip. And it includes narratives of migrant children and their ordeal.



Diego Beruecos

Valeria Luiselli is the author of the novel *Lost Children Archive*.

In the audio above, Luiselli tells Houston Matters producer [Michael Hagerty](#) why this issue has captured so much of her attention and why she wanted to write both fiction and non-fiction accounts of it.

Luiselli will be in Houston for [an event with Inprint](#) alongside fellow writer Tommy Orange on Tuesday, Feb. 26, at Rice University's Stude Concert Hall.



Michael Hagerty

SENIOR PRODUCER, HOUSTON MATTERS



Michael Hagerty is the Senior Producer for Houston Matters. He has a degree in journalism from Abilene Christian University and has served as news director for NPR and PBS stations around Texas and The West, including: KUNR-FM in Reno, Nev.; KNPB-TV in Reno, Nev.; and KWBU-TV/FM in Waco, Texas. He...

[More Information](#)

Arts & Culture > Books & Talks

OPEN UP

Valeria Luiselli Is Always Listening

"I document much more than I invent," says the *Lost Children Archive* author.

By [Ryan Pait](#) • 2/26/2019 at 8:00am

8

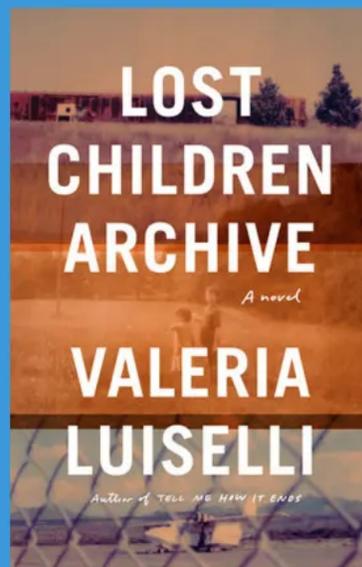


IMAGE: [COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE](#)

TO SAY VALERIA LUISELLI'S NEW NOVEL *Lost Children Archive* is hotly anticipated would be an understatement. It's her first novel written in English, and it's coming right after last year's popular and timely *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, in which Luiselli dissected her work with undocumented children at the U.S.-Mexican border.

Lost Children follows a blended family on a trip across the U.S. as personal and political turmoil loom ever closer, and the action is relayed through a series of bankers' boxes belonging to each character. The book starts as a portrait of the family, but changes when the children start feeling mutinous. As she wrote it, Luiselli tells us she started to realize that "the novel itself had to cease to be the novel of the parents and become the novel of the children."

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT



SPONSORED

Best Escapes

Presented by Houstonia Magazine

On Tuesday, February 26, Luiselli will read as part of Inprint's 2018–2019 Margaret Root Brown Reading Series [alongside Tommy Orange](#). We caught up with Luiselli to talk about not being a spy, juggling two books at once, and American interventionist politics.

This book is in conversation with so many other works, but it also made me think of your book *Tell Me How It Ends*, which I read last year—particularly your line about stories needing to “be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds.” What was it like exploring similar subject matter in completely different ways?

I started writing the novel before I started writing *Tell Me How It Ends*, and I stopped writing *Lost Children Archive* when I realized I was trying to use the novel as a vehicle for my politics and as a depository for a lot of political rage. I was doing a disservice to the novel by trying to use it as that, and I

was also doing a disservice to the subject matter. By fictionalizing something that was so urgent and present and happening right before my eyes, I wasn't watering it down, but I was extracting something fundamental from the subject.

I stopped writing the novel for about six months—I continued to write, just at a different pace. But I basically set it aside for a while. It was very clear when I started writing *Tell Me How It Ends* that that was exactly the form I had to use to be able to document the crisis. Once I was able to do that, I felt that I could go back to *Lost Children Archive* without the responsibility of explaining, I don't know, American interventionist politics in Central America in the 1970s. (Laughs.) Or really all those sort of things that were really just suffocating the novel, but that I had to say somewhere else to be able to paint a more complex panorama of the then-current and still current crisis.

You mention in your acknowledgments that you started writing *Lost Children Archive* in 2014. How did it change over time?

At some point I was going to go on this road trip with my family in 2014, and my plan was to write about South Africa, where I grew up. But then I was also looking at maps of the U.S., and I was like, *Maybe I'm going to do something: two territories, two maps, two meditations*. And as soon as we set off on the road trip, the South African novel just kind of receded to the background and became a distant thing that made no sense to think about right then. And I started making notes for a possible novel about a family traveling. I was especially interested in the way that the children's views on the world maybe tinge everything with a bit of bizarreness and then reveal that what us adults see as "normal" is maybe not so normal. The children shine a kind of light on the everyday that reveals what is crooked or just been taken for granted.

Then very early on as well, I wrote a line in my journal saying, "I can't really write about anything else that's not what's happening right now at the border." I had just heard there were 60,000 children stranded there, abandoned and seeking legal protection. This started haunting me. So that started getting mixed up with my notes: meditations on what was happening, as well as notes on childhood, children, and travel. And throughout the five years of writing, those were the two strands that threaded together.

I wonder what it was like trying to juggle those two very different forms with similar subject matter.

What was weird but actually probably expectable was that *Tell Me How It Ends* then had its own echoes back into *Lost Children Archive*. I think I hadn't decided at all that the kids in the novel would try to run away. I knew that it would be a novel that would cease to be the adults' novel and become the children's novel, that I knew. But I never know what's going to happen in my novels—I wouldn't write them, otherwise. That would be insanely boring, right? But the question came up for me over and over again while writing *Tell Me How It Ends*: What would happen to my kids if they were in that situation; would they survive? That hypothetical question, and the way that imagination can take a step with empathy and

try to understand another's situation—that came back into the novel. So the novel is also a reenactment or a playing out of that possibility and that hypothetical.

So much of the book is concerned with sound, hearing, and listening. What was it like trying to capture that in prose?

The way I work has to do a lot with not isolating myself at all from my surroundings, but rather listening and incorporating the noise, the conversations, the things that happen in front of me. I document much more than I invent. I document other people's conversations. I wouldn't like to think of myself as someone who's spying or anything, but I do observe and I often note down people's weird interactions with dogs, or a mother's conversation with her son on the bus, or schoolchildren interacting, or businessmen talking. I just make notes, always, all the time. It's an exercise in listening as much as it is observation.

So when I sit down to write, I have all of these strands and notes. I combine them and reshuffle them. That's the procedure. So I guess it's natural that my own procedure is reflected in the subject matter of the novel itself. I'm interested in the relationship between procedure and final outcome, and shortening the distance between the two in a way that the final outcome still has the fingerprints of the method used.

I read the book in hardback, but the book's focus on the auditory world made me wonder what the audiobook of *Lost Children Archive* is like.

I narrated the woman's voice! I recorded the woman's voice, and my kid did the kid's voice.

That's awesome. Did you get to provide any input on what it should sound and be like?

I actually haven't heard it yet, but we had so many conversations about what they were thinking. They included some sounds that were maybe relevant to particular parts of the novel. We were a bit experimental with one of the sections—the run-on sentence that's 20 pages—that's like a combination of my voice and the boy's voice.

There was a lot of thinking about what to do with the boxes: Who would narrate the boxes? Would it be the person opening the box in the novel, who is narrating what they're seeing? Or would it be a neutral voice? In the end, we decided it would be the voice of the character who made that box, because the box is full of things that are their own, a piece of them, a materialization of a person's interiority. So there's like the entire chorus.

I loved how much of the book digs into the words of others and how they enter our consciousness—I'm thinking in particular of the passage about Susan Sontag's *Reborn*. What books have provided those "light-marks" for you?

I think a lot of the books are mentioned in this book. (Laughs.) They change over time, but certainly Susan Sontag's diaries are among them. Marina Tsveteyeva's essays. Joseph Brodsky's essays. William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot, their poetry. And Emily Dickinson, definitely. There are so many.

I just loved that idea of how we get these certain lines or passages in our heads, and they mean so much more to us in a way that's hard to explain to other people. But we know exactly what they mean to us.

Totally. I also just like books that take me to other books. Joseph Brodsky is that kind of writer: He's always threading others' thoughts into his. And I've been able to discover a lot of writers thanks to him. Because I like to read books that are like that, I do the same, I guess, right? I fill my books with pointers toward other books. A book should be something that opens up to something else, and not just closing in on itself.

Feb. 26. Tickets \$5. Stude Concert Hall, 6100 Main St. 713-521-2026. More info and tickets at inprinthouston.org.

Filed under

[Readings](#), [Authors](#), [Books](#), [Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series](#), [Inprint](#)

Show Comments

ADVERTISEMENT

Related Content

THERE THERE

Tommy Orange Is Ready to Fail

★

STARHOME

f Houston Chronicle @HoustonChron

Houston Chronicle | Tuesday, February 26, 2019 | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

Section D ★★



Liz Hafalia / San Francisco Chronicle

Tommy Orange's debut novel "There There" is a multigenerational portrait of urban Native American life that takes place in Oakland, where Orange grew up.

BOOK

Tommy Orange takes fresh approach to Native experience

Suspense builds in author's debut 'There There'

By Heather McCormack
CORRESPONDENT

Tommy Orange spent the better part of 2018 speaking to interviewers about the meaning of

being a living, breathing 21st-century Native person, as an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of California.

Yet he defied the all-too-predictable #WeNeedDiverseBooks marketing trap with the publication of his debut novel, "There There" (Alfred A. Knopf), last June; his New York

Times best-seller overshadows his biographical details in a good way. This deeply felt writing should be read by the majority of Americans, regardless of their ethnic background; we desperately need its healing powers right here and right now.

On a bill with author Valeria Luiselli, Orange *Orange continues on D3*

ORANGE

From page D1

will read from his novel and be interviewed by novelist and UH-Downtown faculty member Daniel Peña, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series on Tuesday at Rice University. Afterward, the authors will sign copies of their books, which will be for sale.

Drawing on connotations of both Gertrude Stein and Radiohead, "There There" revolves around 12 characters of Native or mixed-race descent who, for complicated reasons that play out in alternating chapters, converge in a horrific act of violence at the Big Oakland Powwow. (Orange's title comes from a passage in Stein's "Everybody's Biography." "There is no there there," she wrote, after visiting her childhood home in Oakland and finding it different than she had remembered it.)

Literary fame rates a rarer phenomenon than political consensus, and when it arrives, as it has for Orange, nobody says that is has nothing to do with the writer's difference from the status quo and everything with the hard work he's done to tell a universal story. Let's put it out there: Orange, at 36, has performed an incredibly difficult task and written a fresh, suspenseful novel that never assumes any reader's allegiance – white, black, Hispanic, Native or otherwise. Racial and geographic representation are undeniable aspects of its DNA and reasons why it will end up in "The Norton Anthology of American Literature," but it's not the reason why the book sings.

Orange and I spoke in early December, when "There There" was making many critics' best-of lists. "There There" resonated with a wide variety of important outlets, from east to west. But that audience was not on his mind when he wrote the book.

"I don't really think in terms of audience," he said. "I think in terms of a general reader and wanting to honor the general reader's time. Who I realistically thought would be

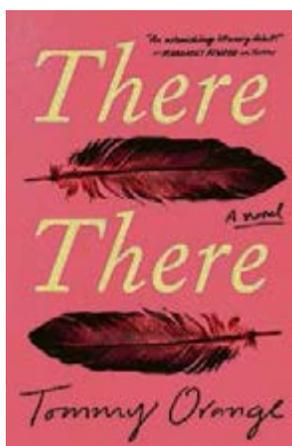
reading the book was Native people. I never imagined that it would do what it has done."

Like most young writers, Orange had humble ambitions and only planned to write "There There" so he could secure a teaching job. He'd envisioned signing with a small literary press and being read by his students. The next part of his trajectory is well documented. Fellow writer Claire Vaye Watkins heard Orange read from his manuscript at a conference, and then she offered to send it to her agent, powerhouse Nicole Aragi. Aragi read it and signed Orange the next day. It was 2016.

"She said it gave her hope," Orange said. "I'm not trying to credit Trump for anything, but the book's reception is related to our political climate. I don't think it would've done what it's done four years ago."

Orange breaks stylistic conventions that most newbies wouldn't attempt; he didn't start reading until after college. He responded that he didn't know any better, operating in part from the inspiration of books like Colum McCann's "Let the Great World Spin."

His incandescent prologue succeeds by creating a fireside effect and terrifying/mesmerizing the reader with its bloody history of white Euro-Americans perpetrating genocide against Native people and other snuffing-out efforts. Without being polemical (never his intent), it sends the message that what's to



follow is the same, but different.

Within the riveting chapters themselves, Orange also shifts point of view, from the first person to the third to the second and back to third. Rather than create a discombobulating effect, the shifts generate a sense of urgency. You read closely. As much as a writer can create a bingelike need for printed text, that is exactly what you have as you take in the trials of Tony Loneman, Dene Oxedene, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and the other characters he has created.

While Orange knew from the very start that he wanted a prologue and a large cast of characters who become entangled at a powwow in his beloved hometown of Oakland, Calif., the editing process at Knopf brought out the formal structure. The soul of the book probably would not have surfaced so freely without Orange incubating at the relatively young MFA Program at Institute of American Indian Arts instead of, say, the Iowa Writers'

Valeria Luiselli and Tommy Orange

Reading will be followed by an interview conducted by novelist/critic/UH-Downtown faculty member Daniel Peña, plus a book sale and signing, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, tickets \$5, Stude Concert Hall, Rice University, 6100 Main; inprintheouston.org.

OTHER RECENT BOOKS OF NOTE BY NATIVE WRITERS

"Heart Berries: A Memoir" by Terese Marie Mailhot: A 2018 New York Times best-seller in addition to a selection of Emma Watson's Our Shared Shelf book club, this essay collection as autobiography chronicles a woman's rise out of illness and a dysfunctional childhood.

"Where the Dead Sit Talking" by Brandon Hobson: In this finalist for the 2018 National Book Award in Fiction, two Native children in the 1980s foster care system in Oklahoma find each other for better and for worse.

Workshop.

"Writers have been becoming writers through reading and writing on their own longer than there have been MFA programs, so it wasn't something I thought I needed," he said. "Then I found out about the low-residency program at IAIA that would let me and my family stay in California. The big difference is that IAIA has a mostly Native faculty and maybe a half Native student base. Not only are the stories being shared diverse, but our diversity of experience brought openness to a diversity of style. Everything bad that I'd heard an MFA program is, this one was not."

The book encapsulates in present-day Oakland centuries of violence against Native people,

including violence committed by Europeans and Americans, as well as that done by Native people to other Native people. Today, Orange seems to be saying, we share a collective bloody history; our sins are intertwined. Without pointing a finger, he reveals our Americanness.

The ending holds readers rapt for not completely revealing the fate of young Orvil Red Feather, who (spoiler alert!) stars in 100 pages of a rough draft of Orange's unnamed follow-up novel. I pressed him about why he chose to be elliptical here – was it for a need for truth, art or both?

"I had always written the book with tragedy and hope in mind," he said. "Regarding the idea of uncertainty, part of tragedy is that you don't

know. For Native people, not knowing is the way things are and have been for a very long time. While I was finishing the book, on national TV, there were Native people being shot with rubber bullets while praying for clean water.

"The job of the novel is to build empathy," Orange said. "There are plenty of Native people who have internalized oppression. They need to hear the same thing (as white people)."

Never mind its commercial success, Orange is proud of how "There There," an electric declaration of Native urbanness, has connected with his own people, explaining that he's been shown love and support from the Native world and, specifically, the Native community in Oakland.

Aetrex Trunk Show, Sat. March 9th



Enter Drawing To Win A Free Pair of Aetrex Shoes!

Free Gift With Purchase

FOOT SOLUTIONS
better health through your feet

6401 Woodway/77057
Woodway@Voss (Right of Sylvia's)
713-706-FOOT (3668) • www.ShoesThatFeelGreat.com

www.MontgomeryCountyHomeAndGarden.com

March 2 & 3 HGTV

Montgomery County
HOME & GARDEN SHOW Presented By: Dock Line Magazine

Meet the Boise Boys of HGTV!!

Home Improvement Experts



HomeShow RADIO
TOM TYNAN
Host of HomeShow Radio

HOUSTON CHRONICLE
DIANE COWEN
Architecture + Home Design Writer

Hot Tub & Swim Spa Expo **Luxury Kitchen & Bath**

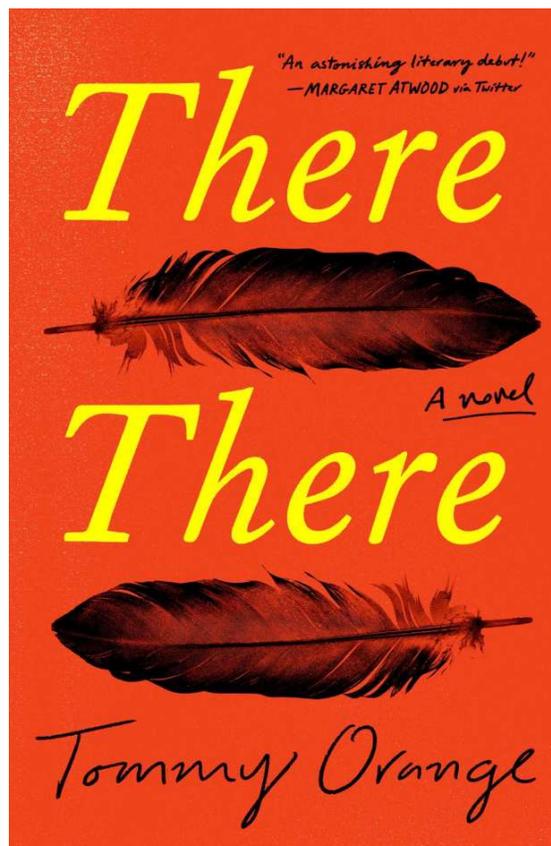
Connect with Home Improvement Professionals!

FREE PARKING **\$2 OFF** ONLINE DISCOUNT COUPON

There's a lot to Tommy Orange's fresh, suspenseful novel about the Native experience

By Heather McCormack, Correspondent

Feb. 25, 2019 | Updated: Feb. 25, 2019 5:03 p.m.



"There There" by Tommy Orange; Alfred A. Knopf (294 pages, \$25.95). (Penguin Random House)

Photo: Penguin Random House, HO / TNS

Tommy Orange spent the better part of 2018 speaking to interviewers about the meaning of being a living, breathing 21st-century Native person, as an enrolled member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes of California.

Yet he defied the all-too-predictable #WeNeedDiverseBooks marketing trap with the publication of his debut novel, "There There" (Alfred A. Knopf), last June; his New York Times best-seller overshadows his biographical details in a good way. This deeply felt writing should be read by the majority of Americans, regardless of their ethnic background; we desperately need its healing powers right here and right now.

On a bill with author Valeria Luiselli, Orange will read from his novel and be interviewed by novelist and UH-Downtown faculty member Daniel Peña, as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

on Tuesday at Rice University. Afterward, the authors will sign copies of their books, which will be for sale.

Unlimited Digital Access for as little as \$0.99.

Read more articles like this by subscribing to the Houston Chronicle

SUBSCRIBE

Drawing on connotations of both Gertrude Stein and Radiohead, “There There” revolves around 12 characters of Native or mixed-race descent who, for complicated reasons that play out in alternating chapters, converge in a horrific act of violence at the Big Oakland Powwow. (Orange’s title comes from a passage in Stein’s “Everybody’s Biography.” “There is no there there,” she wrote, after visiting her childhood home in Oakland and finding it different than she had remembered it.)

Valeria Luiselli and Tommy Orange

Reading will be followed by an interview conducted by novelist/critic/UH-Downtown faculty member Daniel Peña, plus a book sale and signing, as part of Inprint’s Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, tickets \$5, Stude Concert Hall, Rice University, 6100 Main; inprinthouston.org.

Other Recent Books of Note by Native Writers

“Heart Berries: A Memoir” by Terese Marie Mailhot: A 2018 New York Times best-seller in addition to a selection of Emma Watson’s Our Shared Shelf book club, this essay collection as autobiography chronicles a woman’s rise out of illness and a dysfunctional childhood.

“Where the Dead Sit Talking” by Brandon Hobson: In this finalist for the 2018 National Book Award in Fiction, two Native children in the 1980s foster care system in Oklahoma find each other for better and for worse.

Literary fame rates a rarer phenomenon than political consensus, and when it arrives, as it has for Orange, nobody says that is has nothing to do with the writer’s difference from the status quo and everything with the hard work he’s done to tell a universal story. Let’s put it out there: Orange, at 36, has performed an incredibly difficult task and written a fresh, suspenseful novel that never assumes any reader’s allegiance — white, black, Hispanic, Native or otherwise. Racial and geographic representation are undeniable aspects of its DNA and reasons why it will end up in “The Norton Anthology of American Literature,” but it’s not the reason why the book sings.

Orange and I spoke in early December, when “There There” was making many critics’ best-of lists. “There There” resonated with a wide variety of important outlets, from east to west. But that audience was not on his mind when he wrote the book.

“I don’t really think in terms of audience,” he said. “I think in terms of a general reader and wanting to honor the general reader’s time. Who I realistically thought would be reading the book was Native people. I never imagined that it would do what it has done.”

Like most young writers, Orange had humble ambitions and only planned to write “There There” so he could secure a teaching job. He’d envisioned signing with a small literary press and being read by his students. The next part of his trajectory is well documented. Fellow writer Claire Vaye Watkins heard Orange read from his manuscript at a conference, and then she offered to send it to her agent, powerhouse Nicole Aragi. Aragi read it and signed Orange the next day. It was 2016.

“She said it gave her hope,” Orange said. “I’m not trying to credit Trump for anything, but the book’s reception is related to our political climate. I don’t think it would’ve done what it’s done four years ago.”

Orange breaks stylistic conventions that most newbies wouldn’t attempt; he didn’t start reading until after college. He responded that he didn’t know any better, operating in part from the inspiration of books like Colum McCann’s “Let the Great World Spin.”

His incandescent prologue succeeds by creating a fireside effect and terrifying/mesmerizing the reader with its bloody history of white Euro-Americans perpetrating genocide against Native people and other snuffing-out efforts. Without being polemical (never his intent), it sends the message that what’s to follow is the same, but different.

Within the riveting chapters themselves, Orange also shifts point of view, from the first person to the third to the second and back to third. Rather than create a discombobulating effect, the shifts generate a sense of urgency. You read closely. As much as a writer can create a bingelike need for printed text, that is exactly what you have as you take in the trials of Tony Loneman, Dene Oxedene, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and the other characters he has created.

While Orange knew from the very start that he wanted a prologue and a large cast of characters who become entangled at a powwow in his beloved hometown of Oakland, Calif., the editing process at Knopf brought out the formal structure. The soul of the book probably would not have surfaced so freely without Orange incubating at the relatively young MFA Program at Institute of American Indian Arts instead of, say, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.

“Writers have been becoming writers through reading and writing on their own longer than there have been MFA programs, so it wasn’t something I thought I needed,” he said. “Then I found out about the low-residency program at IAIA that would let me and my family stay in California. The big difference is that IAIA has a mostly Native faculty and maybe a half Native student base. Not only are the stories being shared diverse, but our diversity of experience brought openness to a diversity of style. Everything bad that I’d heard an MFA program is, this one was not.”

The book encapsulates in present-day Oakland centuries of violence against Native people, including violence committed by Europeans and Americans, as well as that done by Native people to other Native people. Today, Orange seems to be saying, we share a collective bloody history; our sins are intertwined. Without pointing a finger, he reveals our Americanness.

The ending holds readers rapt for not completely revealing the fate of young Orvil Red Feather, who (spoiler alert!) stars in 100 pages of a rough draft of Orange’s unnamed follow-up novel. I pressed him about why he chose to be elliptical here — was it for a need for truth, art or both?

“I had always written the book with tragedy and hope in mind,” he said. “Regarding the idea of uncertainty, part of tragedy is that you don’t know. For Native people, not knowing is the way things are and have been for a very long time. While I was finishing the book, on national TV, there were Native people being shot with rubber bullets while praying for clean water.

“The job of the novel is to build empathy,” Orange said. “There are plenty of Native people who have internalized oppression. They need to hear the same thing (as white people).”

Never mind its commercial success, Orange is proud of how “There There,” an electric declaration of Native urbanness, has connected with his own people, explaining that he’s been shown love and support from the Native world and, specifically, the Native community in Oakland.

Arts & Culture > Books & Talks

THERE THERE

Tommy Orange Is Ready to Fail

We speak to the breakout author about his successful debut.

By [Ryan Pait](#) • 2/25/2019 at 11:30am

17

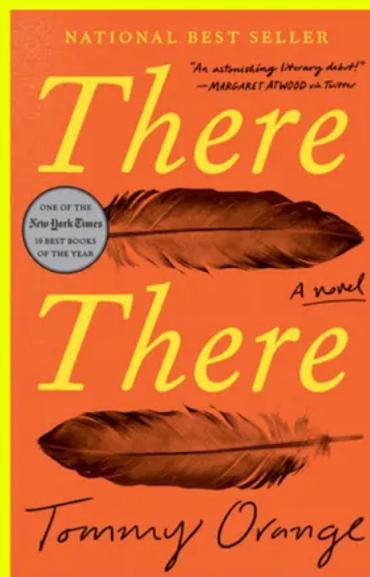


IMAGE: [COURTESY OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE](#)

BUZZY DEBUT NOVELISTS OFTEN GET A LOT OF MEDIA ATTENTION, but that doesn't always mean their book is going to be a hit. Tommy Orange's first novel, *There There*, broke the mold, becoming a critical success and a bestseller when it hit shelves in July 2018.

The book follows a disparate group of Native Americans, young and old, as they all converge for the Big Oakland Powwow. As each character gets closer and closer to the big event, we learn more about them as they reckon with their various and multiple identities and the ties that bind them.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT



SPONSORED

Faces of Houston 2019

Presented by Houstonia Magazine

On Tuesday, February 26, Orange will read from *There There* as he headlines the fifth night of Inprint's 2018–2019 Margaret Root Brown Reading Series with Valeria Luiselli. We caught up with Orange before his trip to Houston to talk about why his second novel has to suck, why *Beautiful Mind*-ing it doesn't always work, and the books that mean the most to him.

The first time I read this book it was a first edition right after the book came out. The copy I read this time was a 13th printing. What does that feel like for you?

The number of books originally being printed—and now we're in, I think, the 16th or 17th printing—it's somewhat abstract information to me. I understand it to mean that it's a lot. But I basically published nothing, and then I published this novel. So I don't have anything to gauge it by. It's all been a crazy whirlwind, and I have a certain amount of ambivalence toward it. It's really good in some ways, and it means I have a career as a writer. But it's a ton of exposure and vulnerability to feel like there's that many people paying attention to you.

I'm sure it's a little terrifying at times.

Totally. And I'm guaranteed to fail with my second book. (Laughs.)

Everybody has the sophomore slump!

I'm going to write a purposefully bad book.

You may have heard this, but *There There* pleasantly reminded me of Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*—mostly because in both books, it's essential for us to hear this chorus of different voices and experiences to get the full picture of what's going on. Whose voice was it easiest to slip into?

There are definitely some that came out faster than others. Tony Loneman, with the Drome (fetal alcohol syndrome), that one came out really fast. As did Thomas Frank. He came out really fast. And the older Opal Viola chapter came out really fast. I wrote

that one in a month.

Who gave you the most trouble?

Opal Viola as a little girl. To render her from the specific perch that I have her at—first person, past tense—you don't quite know when she's telling it. And I got really confused and overthought how much she was supposed to know and how much maturity her voice could have. I wanted to capture a childhood innocence while also being able to tell it as a memory, with some amount of remove. So that one took a while to render.

I definitely resisted writing the end for a while. It's just a big risk—building up to one single event. If you don't pull it off, everything collapses.

Speaking of structure, you have a prologue and an interlude that give the reader more context. Did you know you wanted to include those passages from the beginning, or was it something you realized later?

I knew! And if I'm being completely honest, the initial prologue was just the prologue and the interlude together at the beginning. Then my editor gave me the suggestion to cut it down. I didn't want to lose any of it, so I came up with the idea to have an interlude. Because of that edit, I came up with the idea of the mini chapters. They update you on the characters you've already been introduced to, and give you a quick look back into what they're doing. And that kind of happens again at the end, so you're not jarred by this new structural element. I tried to weave it in in a way that felt organic. By the time you get to that interlude, it sort of connects to what was just being talked about in the story—I didn't want it to feel abrupt.

I was happy when I was reading that Louise Erdrich gets a shoutout in Tony's first chapter, too.

When I got the Louise Erdrich blurb on this book, I just started sobbing. (Laughs.) She doesn't normally blurb very much, and I just think she's an incredible writer. So it was a powerful moment for me.

To compare *There There* again to Erdrich's *Love Medicine*—which is referred to as a novel and as a short story cycle—I felt like the same could be said of your book. Did you have everyone's story planned out from the beginning and split them up? Or did you realize you wanted to have these shorter pieces?

I wanted to earn the right to call it a novel, because I prefer novels to short story collections. So I was really trying to braid the narratives together as tightly as possible so that by the end of it, you'd feel there was a full arc and completion, and everyone sort of makes sense together as a whole. I would always be working on several chapters at once, and that actually helped me think of them together, as opposed to writing each of them separately and then figuring it out at the end. I'm a pretty messy, disorganized worker with my folders, but I can work it out in my head. If I try to work it out visually and *Beautiful Mind* it on the wall with yarn—it gets messier for me. I can make more sense of it if I keep it in my head.

Finally, there's a passage in Tony's first chapter that really struck me on my most recent pass—he's talking about reading aloud to Maxine and sometimes not getting what he's reading, but when he does, he understands it "way down at that place where it hurts but feels better because you feel it, something you couldn't feel before reading it, that makes you feel less alone, and like it's not going to hurt as much anymore." Which books do that for you?

The first two that did that for me were John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Those were just early discoveries. No one was ever really telling me what to read—I worked at this used bookstore that was going out of

business, so I had a lot of time to just explore fiction. And those were two early ones that just hit me somewhere really deep, and it was the first time I was understanding what a novel could do. That actually kind of became the bar: If a novel didn't do that to me, I wasn't really invested in it. I'd expect some level of that to happen.

I really like people who can do something that's intellectually and aesthetically interesting, but also have an emotional core, and have something to say. *Love Medicine* did that for me, too. A lot of Louise Erdrich, really: *The Round House* is a favorite of hers. I really love when books have that page-turning feeling, but also really good writing. It's an elusive thing to be able to do. I've gotten that comment about my book, and I didn't feel like I wrote it that way, so that was a big surprise to hear. I do focus on pacing, and I'm concerned for the reader and their experience, so I don't ever want to be indulgent or bore the reader.

Feb. 26. Tickets \$5. Stude Concert Hall, 6100 Main St. 713-521-2026. More info and tickets at inprinthouston.org.

Filed under

[Stude Concert Hall](#), [Books](#), [Authors](#), [Readings](#), [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series](#), [Inprint](#)

Show Comments

ADVERTISEMENT

Related Content

OPEN UP

Valeria Luiselli Is Always Listening

8:00am • By [Ryan Pait](#)

BEGINNINGS OF A SOUL

Gary Shteyngart marvels at the 'Obliviousness' of the Powerful

11/09/2018 • By [Ryan Pait](#)

WHAT NOT TO 'WEAR'

Jonathan Lethem on America, Robert Mitchum, and Very Bad Interviews

11/07/2018 • By [Ryan Pait](#)

READ ME

7 Books to Put on Your Holiday Shopping List

11/26/2018 • By [Ryan Pait](#)

inprint

447 Heights Boulevard, Houston, TX 77007
Phone: 713-862-4570 • Fax: 713-862-4606