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>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its 8th year and its free event held on the National Mall, Saturday September 27th will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend the festival in person you can still participate online. Use prerecorded podcasts with well-known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival Website at [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). It's now my honor to talk with the internationally renowned and best-selling author Geraldine Brooks. Ms. Brooks is perhaps best known for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel March. In it she retells the beloved American classic Little Women from the father's perspective. Her works include the nonfiction book The Nine Parts of Desire as well as historic fiction including Year of Wonders and her most recent book People of the Book, an intricate novel that traces the journey of a rare illuminated Hebrew manuscript around the globe providing a reader with a vivid lesson in history. Ms. Brooks, welcome and thanks for joining us today.

>> It's my pleasure.

>> We are very much looking forward to your appearance at the Book Festival on September 27th. What can your fans and readers expect to hear from you?

>> I will talk about how I try to find stories from the past where we can learn something but not everything. Where there are voids in the historical record that the novelist imagination has to fill. And I'll talk a little bit about that for each of my three novels. The inspiration for them where you get ideas for stories because I think that's one of the most frequently asked questions of any novelist. And hopefully it will be a discussion where I can hear from people what they're interested in too.

>> Where do you get your inspiration?

>> It's, you know, I always loved what Ernest Hemingway said about that. An idea for a novel can be something that you're lucky enough to overhear or it can be the wreck of your whole damn life. Fortunately for me it's been much more the former than the last for most of my books. The inspiration for my first novel, Year of Wonders, came from a little finger post in the mountains of rural England when I was on a ramble. And I saw a sign pointing to Eyam and underneath it said plague village. And I walked to the village and there I learned an extraordinary story about how the villagers in 1665 had imposed a voluntary quarantine when the Black Plague came to the village. And I became intrigued by thinking about what the following year might have been like as people lived and died in this prison of their own agreement.

>> Now you began your career as a journalist. What inspired you to begin writing novels?

>> I loved being a journalist and I think I'm still actually feeding on a lot of the experiences I had in those decades. I worked mainly overseas covering modern catastrophes. And I think that it was really all about when my son was born the kind of journalism [inaudible] wasn't really compatible for me was having a young child because it involved going off on long open-ended assignments to dangerous places. And I was thinking that well maybe I need a new gig here. And that story of the plague in Eyam has sort of taken root in my imagination. So I decided to sit down and see if I could do something different. And I found that I loved, I loved doing this kind of historical fiction where you follow the line of fact as far as it leads but when it runs out you're free to imagine.

>> And you covered the Middle East for the Wall Street Journal. How does one prepare for an assignment like that? And what kinds of experiences did you have there?

>> You can't really prepare for it. I was hideously unprepared and unqualified for it. I often think that journalism is a bit like the [inaudible] in sausage. You know, if you care about it you shouldn't look too closely into how it gets made. I, I went out there with very little idea of what to expect. And the first year was very hard. It was like a crash course in the history and politics of the region. But then at the end of that first year something extraordinary happened and my young Egyptian and his assistant who was a very westernized young woman. She'd been partly educated in the U.S. and she was planning to go to graduate school at Harvard, very fashionably dressed. She suddenly appeared for work fully veiled. And it was in seeking to understand her decision to embrace Orthodox Islam that I found my work really in the Middle East which was to try and tell the stories of the region through the lives of the women. So after that every time I was covering a war or political development I tried as much as I could to do it through the women's eyes. And that led me to a lot of extraordinary places like Ayatollah Khomeini's wife's afternoon tea party in Tehran and the royal palace in Jordan with Queen Noor during the first Gulf War.

>> Tell us a little bit about your latest book, People of the Book, if you would.

>> That also came out of an idea that I stumbled across when I was reporting. I was covering the siege of Sarajevo and I was in that city. And the gossip among journalists turned one night to a missing priceless 14th century Hebrew codex known as the Sarajevo Haggadah. And the Haggadah had gone missing in the early days of the war and there was all kinds of speculation as to what had become of it. And I was very intrigued by this book because it had been created in Spain during the time of convivencia when Christians and Muslims and Jews were living together if not in a perfect love fest, at least in the spirit of mutual tolerance and intellectual exchange. And that time of course has been ripped apart by the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spanish territory. And I thought that it was extraordinary that this little book should have survived that catastrophe and then to

find itself 500 years later reenacting essentially the same story. Where this city that was a big gun of tolerant coexistence, Sarajevo, was being torn apart by the forces that wanted to demonize [inaudible]. And so the book seemed to me like a witness to a lot of human history. And years later I turned to try and uncover more about the book and found out what we knew and didn't know. And found that it was the perfect, perfect subject for the kind of novels I love to write.

>> Tell me a little bit about how you approach research in your novels. They're very meticulously researched. How much time do you spend on research and what are some of your methods?

>> Well, you know, it's not that I sit down and do the research in one go and then do the writing in one go. The two things are interlocked for me. First of all I have to hear a voice because I like to write in first person. So I read enough until somebody starts to talk to me in my head. And once I've got the voice that tells me who the character is and who she, generally it's a she, sometimes not, who she is will tell me what she'll do and that drives the plot. And as the story takes off then I know what I need to know. And to People of the Book that was a wide array of things from what life was like in the Venetian ghetto in 1609 because that the Sarajevo Haggadah past through Venice at that time. So I went to Venice and walked the streets of the ghetto where you can still get a great sense of the past. Things haven't changed that much there. I wanted to tie the stories of this book through time together with a contemporary character who was a book conservator. So I hung out in labs with real conservators and watched how they worked and watched often how they would do various investigations of for instance a wine stain on old parchment. So I spent a very interesting afternoon at the Strauss Center for Conservation at Harvard splashing kosher wine and non-kosher wine on old scraps of parchment looking at them under video spectral comparatives and so forth. It was fun.

>> I think, I would think that one of the challenges of writing historical fiction would be sort of the meshing of the fact with the fictional elements, the balance between the two, the verisimilitude and so forth. How do you approach that? How do you balance the two?

>> I think that I try and stick as closely to the known facts as I can. If I deviate from the known facts for storytelling reasons I always come clean about that in an afterward for the readers so they'll know what is the historical record and what is novelist indention. But there comes a point where you can't know. And with the Sarajevo Haggadah that point comes pretty soon. You get, you can, I managed to find out a lot about what happened to the book during World War II for example when it was saved by a Muslim librarian and hidden among Islamic checks for the duration of the war when the Nazis were trying to get the book. But going back before that what happened in Venice in 1609 is very unclear. And why the book was created with [inaudible] illuminations in Spain in the 1400s also is an area where we can only speculate. So when you run out of facts that's when you try and create plausible fictions that are engaging for the reader and hopefully not too far away from something that could possibly have happened.

>> You mentioned that you do research essentially until you hear the voice, the voice who's going to tell the story. Do you ever base you characters on people from real life or at least bring elements of real people into your characters?

>> Definitely. In as far as they can be known. So in People of the Book the character of the librarian who saves the book from the Nazis, I did a lot of research into the life of the real man who was a fascinating and heroic resister of fascism called Dervis Korkut. But because [inaudible] is a novel and I'm giving him an emotional life and thoughts and words I changed the name. But I hope that the character's true to the humanistic ideals of the real Dervis Korkut.

>> You mentioned that most of your protagonists are women. But of course as we mentioned earlier your book March, you told the story of Little Women from the standpoint of an absent father. What inspired you to write the father's story?

>> Well I was thinking about idealists at war. We were living in Virginia when the idea for March came to me. We lived in an unusual place in Virginia. A little town that had been settled by Quakers. And it had a fascinating Civil War history because Quakers of course are pacifists but they're also ardent abolitioner. And a few of the young men in our town raised the only regiment in Virginia that fought on the Union side because of their feeling that slavery was greater evil than in war. And I was thinking about those young men and coming to that decision. And then what happens to idealists when they go to war for a passionately held conviction but then they get caught up in the brutalities of any war and are forced to live with things that are totally at odds with their ideals. And that started me thinking about this idealist at war from Little Women who we hear so little about. Mr. March is absent from the first page of that book. And we know that he's gone off to administer to the Union troops. And we know that he's an abolitionist. And I just started to think well what kind of war would a New England abolitionist transcendentalist like Mr. March have had. And because Louisa May Alcott had based Little Women so closely on herself and her sisters, I thought I wonder if there's anything in her father's biography that I could use to help shape this character. And I'm embarrassed now to say that I didn't know anything about Bronson Alcott until I embarked on that research. But I found one of the most intriguing characters I think of American philosophy. One of the reviewers of the book put it more eloquently than I could. He said that if Emerson and Thoreau, the shooting stars of American idealism, Bronson Alcott was the dark matter from which they drew their energy. And this is really true. Alcott was a great friend of Thoreau and Emerson and he really did shape their thinking in myriad ways. And so I had his journals and his letters and I think his clear window into the mind of an idealistic Victorian man as you could possibly hope for.

>> And were those parallels between Bronson Alcott and Mr. March there?

>> Well of course. So then I was able to make up my character of Mr. March as Louisa May had drawn on herself and her sisters. I drew on her father to shape my character. And so I gave Mr. March a lot of Bronson's

convictions and eccentricities and certainly his cadences of his expression are very much drawn from Bronson Alcott's and ways of expressing himself.

>> Are there special challenges or do you feel I guess added pressures in retelling a classic story or telling it from a different point of view?

>> Well yeah. I think I made sort of a deal with myself that I wasn't going to tread on Louisa May's toes. I would only go where she had chosen not to go. So there's only one point in my novel that overlaps with Little Women which is the scene where Mr. March comes home to surprising his daughters. And in Little Women, Louisa May has him go around the room and tell how the year has changed each of them in his opinion. But nothing is said in that account of what a year at war has done to him. So I flipped the point of view and look at things through Marches eyes coming back as a damaged and very troubled man carrying a lot of the trauma of war home with him.

>> What's the most interesting historical period that you've written about? Or what do you derive the most pleasure from?

>> I'm very keen on the 1660s in European history because I think it's a wonderful period when the medieval mind is giving way to the modern mind. And when you read the journals of 17th century figures you really suddenly recognize the thinking as it's a sarcasm and a wit and kind of a, I don't know just a very modern way of looking at the world. That it's a fascinating time because at the same time as Newton is inventing calculus you've still got women, you know, being hanged as witches. So the old way of thinking is still gripping at peoples heels as the new is starting to enlighten them. So I find that a very interesting period to speculate about.

>> Are there any time periods that you haven't yet written about that perhaps you'd like to explore in a future novel?

>> Oh yeah. I think probably so, probably so. But the book I'm working on now is in the 1660s. So I'll be able to state my interest in that period for a couple of years yet.

>> What can you tell us about that book?

>> Not a lot yet. It's still, I'm still very much at the beginning of the process to me which is still figuring out who is the storyteller here. But it's set very close to home. And home for me now is Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. So that's about all I can say about it.

>> You said in the past that you would have to work for it if you ever decided to write an Australian novel. I'm curious as a native of that country what were you saying? What did you mean by that?

>> So when I was growing up in Australia in the 1960s we were very much suffering from what was called the cultural cringe. We still very, very much felt that we were some kind of fast long [inaudible] of Britain. You hadn't really embraced the complexity of our own Australian identity

taking into account the ancient aboriginal culture which is the longest continuing artistic tradition in the world. We didn't really study that in school. We didn't really read authors who were writing about our own reality. My imagination was very much a British colony. And my bookshelves were [inaudible] with English children's writers. So I feel like the voices in my head, the imaginative voices were very, very much from someplace else. And that really to go back and write an Australian novel I would have to learn it like a migrant, you know, every leaf and tree and detail because it just wasn't part of my childhood to look at my own reality closely and in an imaginative way. My mind was always somewhere else.

>> What kind of advice would you offer someone if they wanted to pursue a writing career of their own? In particular if they had an interest in writing historical fiction?

>> Well the beauty of a writing career is you can come at it from any direction. There's no one way. You don't have to study this or get that degree or master this particular body of learning. You have to live a little bit and get some experiences and get into the, a place where you can find inspiration. But that's different for everybody. So I think that all I would say is read and write and read and write and, you know, then eventually you'll find the story that compels you to tell it.

>> Well Geraldine Brooks before we let you go. Obviously again we're excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival. Why do you feel it's important to participate in the Book Festival?

>> I think anything that brings people together around books is a wonderful celebration. And having been lucky enough to be a guest at the Book Festival before it really is a remarkable day to see the Mall full of readers and passionate, passionate people who are concerned about history and literature and kids books and poetry. It really is a great thing.

>> Well the latest book is People of the Book. Geraldine Brooks thank you so much for your time today.

>> Thank you very much.

>> And we will be hearing more from you at the National Book Festival, that's Saturday September 27th on the National Mall in Washington from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors go to [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). From the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. this is Matt Raymond, thank you for listening.

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