

Rogue Librarians, Bonus Episode
Author Gayle Forman

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Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books.

We are two of your hosts, Dorothy.

And Alanna.

And we are the Rogue Librarians.

We would love for you to participate in our discussion.

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So Alanna, given the topic of the book that we are reading today, I was wondering if you could tell me about some sort of friendship that you may have had that was intergenerational, someone a few generations ahead of you.

Sure.

Well, the first person who came to mind is a relative of mine, but that's my grandfather.

And he is 92 years old now and remarkably still very sharp.

And he is a wonderful presence in my life.

I love talking to him on the phone.

I love visiting him in person at his assisted living facility.

And he's just been such a wise and kind and empathetic person.

And I feel incredibly lucky that he's been part of my life for so long and that I've been able to learn a lot about his past and the different stages of his life.

And I appreciate that he listens to what's going on in my life too, and helps me think through challenges.

And I am just very grateful that he is my grandfather.

What about you?

That's so great that you still have him in your life.

I'm very lucky.

My grandparents have all passed.

But I was thinking, and they all lived far away from where we were growing up.

So we knew them from visits and such, but not, we weren't super close.

But I am remembering a time when as a young adult, my grandmother came to visit, and I was charged with bringing her to the airport.

And the two of us, like I was young.

I had never driven to the airport before, figuring out where to park and all of that.

And we ended up having to like walk all the way through the whole terminal to get to the whole other end where we should have parked at a different place.

And it was just so fun to have this sort of, we were both laughing and thinking of it as an adventure.

And you don't get to have that kind of experience with your grandparents when you don't live near them.

So that was, that's a very fond memory for me.

That's really sweet.

Well, as Dorothy mentioned, the book we're discussing today really focuses on an intergenerational friendship.

And we are so excited to share our interview with the author Gayle Forman.

Award-winning author and journalist Gayle Forman has written several bestselling novels, including those in the Just One Day series, Where She Went, and the number one New York Times bestseller, If I Stay, which has been translated into more than 40 languages and was adapted into a major motion picture.

Her first middle grade novel, Frankie & Bug, was a New York Times Best Children's Book of 2021.

She lives in Brooklyn, New York with her family.

And today we are discussing her newest novel, Not Nothing, which comes out August 27th.

And we loved reading this book and it was such a pleasure to talk with her.

I learned so much more about where these ideas came from in her life and why they're so important to her.

And if you are interested in a really moving and powerful book, I highly recommend reading Not Nothing and listening to what she has to say about it.

What did you think, Dorothy?

Yeah, I loved knowing that it did not start out as a middle-grade book.

So there really is something in it for everyone.

And I think the framing of it through the eyes of a 12-year-old definitely brings something to it that I think everybody can enjoy.

And also through the eyes of a 107-year-old.

So we get both perspectives.

Right.

You get them both.

And you get a story within the story, which is always fun as well.

And I found the inner story to be incredibly gripping.

I found the development of friendships and community on the outside to be very moving.

And Gayle was just a delight to talk with.

So I'm so glad we had the opportunity to talk with her.

All right, so without further ado, here's the interview.

Gayle, thanks so much for joining us on Rogue Librarians.

I'm so glad to be here with some Rogue Librarians.

They're my favorite kind of librarian.

Awesome.

Well, congratulations on the august 27th release of your new novel, Not Nothing.

Yeah, it's coming so soon.

I keep thinking like, oh, it's summer, and it's literally around the corner.

Thank you.

I'm very excited about this one.

It was such a beautiful book.

We loved reading it, and we can't wait to discuss it with you.

We wanted to ask a couple of questions about your background first though.

All right.

So what was one of the most influential books that you read when you were going up, and why?

All of the Ramona books, which I think have been like influential throughout my life.

But I think as a kid, Ramona is just such a fully human young person in that she is trying to figure out how to be the person she wants to be and messing up because she is young and figuring it out.

I love that.

I love seeing her flaws and her imperfections, and they were not parodied or cutesified.

They were just there.

I think that made me feel seen as a kid, and maybe my imperfections were also okay.

I reread that book as a parent to my young children and learn new things about parenting from the Quimby's again.

Then when I became a middle-grade author, I think Beverly Cleary's voice and Ramona's voice were very much in my head, giving myself permission to write the characters I wrote in Frankie & Bug.

So those books have been hugely influential then and now.

Awesome.

I too love those.

And in fact, just had a conversation with my 21-year-old the other day who was watching Ramona and Beezus, and said, I'm so Ramona.

All right.

So it still resonates.

Could you please tell us more about how you became a writer?

You know, I became a writer, I think, first I became a storyteller, and it was really just I was bored a lot as a kid.

It was the 70s, and I had kind of like hippie adjacent parents who didn't believe in things like TV, but did believe in things like six-hour hikes on the weekends, and my older siblings aged out of those.

And so it would just be me and my parents, and the only way to keep from sort of going crazy was I would just concoct these huge stories in my head.

And that's sort of how it started.

I started by doing it to kind of like entertain myself, and then I started writing things down just because I enjoyed it long before I ever thought I was going to become a writer.

I just enjoyed making up stories and writing them down.

That's wonderful.

Could you also please tell us more about your involvement in Authors Against Book Bans?

Yes, I'm very glad that you asked.

So Authors Against Book Bans is a fairly new organization of authors.

I think there's almost 2,000 of us at this point.

And really, we are meant to kind of be the author army in the sort of fight that educators like libraries like yourself and teachers have been sort of dealing with, I would say, for too long against really a small, incredibly vocal minority that is really looking to kind of undermine our faith and trust in public institutions like libraries and schools through these book bans and book challenges, and sort of telling people what they should read.

And personally, I'm a parent.

I think it's completely within a parent's purview to have conversations within their family about what books are and are not appropriate for the family to read.

That's fine.

But I think when you impede upon another family's freedom to read, it's very un-American.

So we are here to really support a lot of the grassroots groups that have been doing this and to sort of lend some author muscle to it.

And also just to make sure that librarians and educators understand, like, you're not alone in this.

We have your back.

That's wonderful.

We're so grateful that you and the other authors are doing that.

We're so grateful that you've been doing the work that you've been doing.

In this area, I'm sorry that you have to do it, but we're here for you.

Thank you.

Well, we do enjoy reading, you know, nothing's more scintillating than reading something someone tells you not to.

I mean, it is a thing.

It's like, the best way to get a book read in a family is to say to your kid, don't read this.

In fact, I have this friend Marjorie, who when she wanted her kids to read a book, would try that.

She would say, I'm going to put this here on the shelf, because I don't think you're ready for it yet.

Of course, that got the kids scrambling for the book.

I'm ready to talk about Not Nothing.

Do you want to give our listeners an introduction to the book?

I would be happy to.

Not Nothing is my upcoming middle-grade novel, and it's about a 12-year-old boy named Alex, who does something very bad, truly bad.

I'm not going to tell you what it is.

You have to read the book to find out.

While he's awaiting a hearing at the end of the summer to decide what's going to happen to him, this very sympathetic social worker arranges for him to volunteer, I'm making air quotes because Alex says forced to volunteer at an assisted living facility.

There he meets Josey, who is 107 years old.

He's a Polish-Jewish holocaust survivor.

He hasn't spoken in the last five years because he's just waiting and waiting and waiting to die.

When Alex stumbles into his room, for whatever reason that Josey doesn't understand at that moment or Alex, he begins telling Alex a story of this young woman who he fell in love with in pre-war Poland, who started out small and a little bit bigoted, but by being invited to rise to the occasion of her own life, she became this heroic figure who saved Josey's life.

Thank you.

We loved your book so much and we are very excited to have the opportunity to talk about it more with you.

For the first question, in the author's note, you discuss some people and events that sparked your ideas for Not Nothing, including the love story of Jerzy Bielewski and Szyla Szybulska.

Could you please tell us more about your research and writing process for this novel?

Yes, and well done almost with the Polish pronunciation.

I'm very lucky that my publicist on this book is Polish.

How do I say this?

Yeah, I'm afraid I was just taking an attempt.

I wasn't absolutely positive.

I think Poles will not hold us too responsible.

It was really just this whole constellation of pieces of my life that came together.

My grandparents were German Jews who left Germany in 1938, months before Kristallnacht.

Their story of trying to normalize it, normalize it, normalize it until you couldn't normalize it anymore, really stuck with me.

That was one part of it.

Another part of it was this love story, as you mentioned, that I had read about and seen a movie based on, which was this interfaith couple.

One of them was Jewish, one of them was Catholic and they met when they were actually both prisoners at Auschwitz and they had this daring escape.

The second part of the story which didn't make it into Not Nothing is they each thought the other was dead, but rediscovered many years later that they were alive.

That was in my head.

Then this is coming at a time when we saw, I think I started this book in 2016, 2017, and we saw this sudden huge rise in antisemitism, Islamophobia, Asian bias crimes, just all of these hate crimes and these things that we like to think are the past really were resurgent.

It caught me wondering, I thought about that Hannah Arendt quote about the sad truth of it all, is that most evil happens because men do nothing.

And so I wondered what was activating these people to become so hateful, and how did people get activated, and how do they get deactivated?

So I started doing a lot of work about people, particularly women who got into hate groups and who got out of hate groups.

And one common theme was that they, like so many of us, are looking for a place to belong, a sense of community.

And a lot of people who sort of did not have it, kind of found it in this sort of most terrible place.

So all of this is spinning around.

And then I go visit my sister in Seattle, where she is running an assisted living facility.

And I meet some of the residents there.

And I should back up and say that I've always sort of had a thing for assisted living facilities and older people.

I used to volunteer at one in New York.

And there was a woman named Oli, who I would go visit every week.

And she was a Hungarian Jew who had been saved from the war by Raoul Wallenberg, which I knew nothing about.

So all of these kind of came together.

And then when I go and to where my sister works, and I meet this man named Sam, and he's 98 years old.

He's sharp as a tack.

He told me stories about the war.

He left Austria before the war, but then he went back as a US soldier.

And just something about him and his humor and his generosity and his incredible intelligence and memory and wisdom triggered the character of Josey.

And sort of after that, it all came together.

And then it just took me seven years to write it.

Wow.

Thank you.

So why did you decide to make it middle grade?

And aside from vocabulary and that sort of thing, were there any challenges in writing middle grade instead of YA, like some of your other novels?

The challenge of this one was how to make a story that is narrated by a 107-year-old man, because I didn't try a draft of this as YA.

I tried it.

I'm like, oh, this has to be an adult book because I really want this character, this 107-year-old to be telling the story.

It wasn't quite working and I sent it to Heather Hebert, who's a bookseller in Haveford, Pennsylvania, who's become a friend of mine over the years.

I'm like, what do you think of this?

She loved it.

I said, I'm thinking of doing it middle grade.

She said, I'm so glad you told me that because I was thinking, why are you wasting this on adults?

I went to my editor, but we had to see how this would work.

The real challenge was that I wanted it to be Alex's story, and I wanted it to sound like a 12-year-old boy and how he's thinking and processing the world.

But I wanted Josey to be the storyteller.

He's this narrator.

That was the real challenge in figuring out how that would work.

Josey's this omniscient narrator, so he's telling you what's happening with Alex, but occasionally he's jumping in with his own wisdom.

Once I figured that out, that was the challenging part.

Writing it for middle grade, it's the same with Frankie & Bug, where once I find the voice, it's just like boom, it just flows out of me.

Once I figured out Alex's voice and how Josey would channel it, that part was easy.

That's so interesting.

I found it really cool how you could go back and forth between what Josey was observing and thinking, and then what Alex's thoughts and feelings were, so that's really neat.

I loved that Josey was addressing Oka, like telling this story to Oka in his mind.

Yes.

That was always the case from the beginning.

I realized when I made it middle-grade, this made it so much better.

It was almost like a tease.

I didn't tell you straightaway who he's telling the story to.

In this version, it's literally in the first page of the book.

I've seen the book described a second person, and I'm like, oh, that's true.

It's not like second-person books I've read where the entire thing is you, you, you, you, but he's telling the story to somebody else.

And so he's addressing her on occasion directly while he's telling the story about Alex.

Although within the story, he's actually telling Alex the story about meeting Oka, and then he's speaking directly to Alex.

Very cool.

In the author's note, you wrote, quote, what happens when we don't judge someone solely for the worst thing that they've done, but give the space and grace, and yes, opportunity to do a better thing, even a best thing, end quote.

You showed multiple characters rising to the occasion of their lives.

Why was this idea important to you, and what do you think are some things that help people to make a better choice in life?

That's a really good question.

So thank you for asking that.

At the beginning of my career, I was a journalist and I interviewed some unsavory people when I was a journalist, including early on a holocaust denier.

And I had a really hard time divorcing their humanity from the views of theirs, which I found completely abhorrent and abhorrent.

And that is something that has sort of stuck with me, is that no matter who I meet, most people I meet, maybe this is why I don't really write villains, I just I cannot fail but to see the humanity in them.

And I think in some cases, people just are not invited to be their better selves.

Alex was not invited to be their better self, his better self until he was.

Olka was not invited to be her better self until she was.

And when you offer up this invitation, you're coming at somebody with a sense of optimism, which is like, and also just a sense of respect.

Like, I believe this is, I believe this is in you.

I believe this is in all of us.

I'm going to sort of operate from a place of hope and generosity and assume, assume the best about you.

And I think a lot of times these days, we're sort of starting out seeing the worst of one another and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So I really wanted to show all these characters who hadn't necessarily been given the opportunity and who were, and when you start to do that and rising to the occasion, it means very different things to different people.

It's not just like doing a good deed.

It is doing something that brings you closer to your better self, and only you know when you get there.

It's a feeling that you get.

And it becomes addictive because you start to understand you feel better with this, but you need to be beckoned out sometimes, shown the way, asked, offered, invited to that self.

So I don't know if that really answers the question, but it felt really important.

And I think, you know, how do we get people to do that?

I think we approach people with the assumption that they are going to be good.

You know, I went traveling around the world right after 9-11.

This might not mean things to a lot of younger readers.

And I remember, like, we were just so terrified of the world out there.

And should we go?

Shouldn't we go?

And I got out there and I realized most people you meet in the world are good people who mean good by you and who want to do good and loving things to you.

And that was certainly the experience that year.

And it has been kind of my experience moving forward.

So I just think it's about giving people the opportunity and opening yourself up to other people being that way for you, if that makes any sense.

Yeah, definitely.

And I've noticed that as a teacher too, that if you, I think sometimes teachers get a little jaded and judge students for problems they've been causing in class.

And I think if you try to see past that and see that all of them have this ability to do better things with their lives and to show themselves to be stronger students.

I think how you look at people is so important.

So that makes a lot of sense.

It is.

And teachers have like the hardest and most important job.

And I know we all pay lip service to that, but I think that you do and should be paid appropriately for that.

because it is, I cannot imagine what it is like sort of going to work with sort of that amount of responsibility and how you would address disruptions in the classroom that maybe make it harder.

Like that is a difficult space to be in.

And I'm not, I don't want to sort of sugar coat that and make it easier to say, oh, just rise to the occasion.

But, you know, I think even when you could sort of pause and sort of understand the more global picture of what might, the dynamics that might be playing out in your classroom, I think that that gives sort of all of us just a little bit more space for compassion, which I think is itself a form of rising to the occasion.

Exactly.

We absolutely, in fact, I was thinking, I love that this is aimed at middle grade because it is a time in their life when they're only barely starting to really think about what they do and how it impacts other people.

So it's a nice time in their lives to read something like this and be prompted to think about how their actions are affecting other people.

Absolutely.

And it's also a time in their life when they're maybe starting to get cell phones and be in spaces that are more virtual, where it's, I think, a lot easier to dehumanize somebody as it is when you're face to face.

So I think if we can try and counter that with, like, okay, there's a certain kind of hit that comes when that dopamine hit, when you burn somebody, you get a lot of likes for it or whatever, shares or whatever the latest is.

I sound like an ancient person.

There is a high that comes from that for sure.

That is the whole premise of social media.

But it's not necessarily the greatest thing.

So I think if we can also expose them to what happens when you are your better self and you are a better self in the real world among people that are around you, maybe it can be a bit of a counterbalance.

I was also interested in the way the word opportunity had a very different meaning to Alex than to the other people who were using it in his life.

I thought maybe we could discuss why you decided to include that about Alex.

Absolutely.

It's so funny because that opening chapter, which is called opportunity or opportunity is a balderdash.

That was late in the game and it opened a little bit different before.

Alex has been sent to this assisted living facility by the social worker and it is an opportunity.

That word is so triggering for Alex because he's heard it before and he has trusted people to make his life better, and it has not made his life better in ways that he can see.

He is very angry, he is very distrustful, he is coming off of a really bad year in which he has done a very bad thing, and I don't think he has even been able to start grappling with it.

Then this social worker starts talking about opportunity, and Alex is like, you are full of it.

What do you know about opportunity?

The word does come back a couple of times in this book, because of course, opportunity is another word for an invitation.

It's another word for this opening up of something you might not have seen before, but he can't see that in the beginning.

By the end of the book, hopefully he can and the readers can.

I feel like it said something about approaching conversations from a place of privilege, that this word opportunity is so benign to people who are coming at it from a place of privilege, which Alex does not enjoy.

Yes.

He looks at this social worker and later at Maya-Jade, and he just thinks like, what do they know of what I've had to go through?

Then he finds out that actually, even though both of them have material privileges beyond what he does, and particularly Maya-Jade, but actually, they go through their own hardship as well, that financial privilege does not insulate you from all hardship.

How did you make the choice?

You've mentioned a couple of times now the bad thing that Alex has done, and how did you make the choice to not reveal what that was until late in the story?

There's a couple reasons for that.

Part of it is that Alex cannot even touch it.

It is too hot to handle.

For all of his talk in the beginning about how he doesn't care what happens to him, and he can go to juvie, and whatever, and he wants to leave, and he doesn't want to be there, and the shady glen, the living facility smells like death, and he's just got all this false bravado.

For all of that, he can't touch what he did.

He is so full of shame around it.

So partially, it takes Alex being surrounded by people who start to love him and care about him, for him to kind of unclench enough to get enough of a distance away to sort of be able to even look at it.

So that's number one.

And number two is, I and Josey, I think that you have to get to know him so you can see it within the context of what you now know to be this full person.

Not just the hardship that he endured before, but also some of the better and best things that he has done since.

because I don't think that a mistake, even a truly grave mistake like the one Alex made, should ever cut off the opportunity for a child to become their better self.

And at the beginning of the book, it seems like that might happen.

And by the time it's revealed, and I think there's some readers that when they read about what he's done, they will not forgive him.

And that is completely fair.

But I want them to see it within the context of, look what he has done since then.

Look what he has done when he has been invited to become his better self, when he has been told a story about Olka and been able to see all these parallels, to understand that he is not uniquely alone in the really terrible things that have happened to him.

So I think it had to be a reveal at the end, because by that point, you see the whole canvas.

That makes so much sense.

And I was guessing that was probably why you waited to save that reveal until later in the story.

We wanted to ask a little bit more about the friendship between Alex, Maya-Jade and Josey, which we really loved.

And we were wondering how you decided to focus on how the three of them impact each other in the story.

Well, it was so fun to write Maya-Jade as the spoil to Alex because she cracks me up.

She has her little clipboard.

There's a hyphen between the Maya and the Jade.

And she can tell if you say her name without thinking of the hyphen, which Alex thinks is ridiculous.

But so I guess they're like the friendship version of like the middle grade version of like enemies to lovers.

They just get off on the wrong foot in part because of Alex.

And when he first starts to become friends with Josey, he does not let Maya-Jade in at all.

She's very interested in him.

She's tried to get some of the residents to talk to her, but none of them like her as much as Alex.

And it allows Alex to see that she has some insecurity and some jealousy about him.

And because there is a very big difference between them from a socioeconomic standpoint, he's just really been focused on how spoiled she is.

She gets to go to private school and she gets to eat there with her grandmother, and she's not forced to volunteer.

He really can't see past that, but that's the first bit in where it's like, oh, wait a second, she's jealous of me.

It's a big moment of, I think, growth when Alex opens up the friendship to invite Maya-Jade in to talk to Josey, because he has felt so special and chosen by Josey, and he really wanted to keep that to himself.

At that point, it makes him feel better, part of his bigger, better self, to invite Maya-Jade in, even though that causes some discomfort for him, because Maya-Jade is Jewish and Josey is Jewish, and so they share a vocabulary, and understanding that sometimes makes Alex, who hasn't really heard much about what happened in Poland with Jews and the holocaust in World War II, makes him feel a little bit like an odd guy out.

So he kind of has to grapple with that, and he does, and they work through it.

There's some bumpy spots there, but they work through it.

So it was important, I think, for him, getting to know his more generous self, to invite Maya-Jade into that relationship.

And then of course, it's fun just to have the banter, because I loved all the bantering scenes between Maya-Jade and Alex, and I like the scenes between Alex and Josey.

So putting the three of them together just kind of like increased the fizz exponentially.

just a heads up, the next question contains a spoiler.

So if you'd like to skip that, you can head on over to about minute 34, where there's another audio cue to let you know that we're done.

Now back to our regularly scheduled programming.

We also wanted to mention that we loved the character Frank, the social worker, and then I realized that he was Frankie at a much younger age in your other middle grade novel, *Frankie & Bug*, which I loved as well.

So how did you decide to include a character from *Frankie & Bug* as an adult in *Not Nothing*?

And how did you decide how his character would change since he was Frankie in 1987?

One of the reasons I wanted to write *Frankie & Bug* is because we have this sort of historical perspective of being able to look at how things would have been for a young trans boy and like a young biracial girl in 1987 LA, looking at it through our now lens.

It's similarly kind of how Josey narrates *Not Nothing*.

He's 107.

He was born in like the teens or 20s, 1915.

I can't even do the math.

But he has this very long, long timeline perspective that young people don't have because they're younger.

So I really wanted to be able to give Frank the future that 1987's Frankie can't quite imagine for himself.

It's almost inconceivable.

And so it was important for me to be able to kind of put the coda on that, to sort of show Frankie become Frank, become a social worker so that he could do the advocating on behalf of people that he had needed when he was young and sort of continues to need, everybody does.

So that was really important.

And also another little spoiler is to show that his friendship with Bug, which was so sustaining and it's unclear at the end of *Frankie and Bug*, like if they're ever going to see each other again, that they have stayed friends through all these years.

And there's some parallels between Frankie and Bug and Maya-Jade and Alex and that like they don't like each other when they first met, they first meet, they're kind of thrown together by circumstance and they have to kind of take a minute to circle each other and to kind of find where that commonality is and they find it.

And they focus on that and it's a really wonderful foundation for building a friendship.

That's beautiful.

I loved both of those friendships.

So thank you.

Spoiler over, it is now safe to keep listening.

All right.

So we talked earlier about the recent resurgence in anti-Semitic attacks and other hate crimes.

How do you think your novel could help people to cope with and or prevent these types of attacks?

That is a good question and a tall order.

It is.

I can give you my thoughts, which is I thought it was very interesting, the way I would do this without spoilers, but the way that Alex thinks about hate crimes.

Yeah.

I mean, it's interesting because for a 12-year-old, yes, one of the things you'll find out when you read this book is, not just what Alex did, but why he did it versus the perception of why he did it.

His point is, what difference does it make?

He did it because he was feeling hateful toward this person.

I do think having compassion, even for people who you think have done terrible things can be helpful, while still also holding them to account.

I think that understanding historically, that these things have just happened in recent past, and that they happen not because everybody is evil and nefarious, but because we just allow things to happen, even though part of our conscience knows that we should be doing better.

So, if anything, I hope that this book inspires people to listen to that part of their conscience, to when that call comes, that little tiny call is being like, do better, stick up for what I know is right.

Don't sort of just go with the crowd because they're doing something.

I actually believe those small moments multiply, because once you start doing that, it becomes addictive.

It becomes, just a random side note.

We're letting kind of like a random stage stranger who needs a place to stay, stay at our place.

And she was like, I can't believe you're so generous.

I'm like, the secret to me is like, being generous makes me happy.

It's my little drug.

So I want to hit of it over and over again.

I think if we can guide people to that, as well as to just sort of like trying to figure out what unites you with somebody who seems different from you as opposed to the obvious things that might divide you, it's a very nice step in to a place of mutual understanding that at the very least can build something like respect and very best can build something like love.

And I hate to be cheesy and be like, love conquers all because love is also what fires the hard work of like going out there and knocking on doors and making sure people vote and, you know, pushing back against book bands.

It's not just enough to be like, oh, I love everyone.

It is it is active.

Love is an active thing.

Hope is a thing of activeness, activity.

So I just think anything that can get people to sort of get past their first knee jerk of judging somebody either from having done something bad, said something that wasn't didn't seem cool or seeming different.

If that can get us there, maybe that's a little step of the way.

And if somebody like Josey can come through what he has come through and still see the best in people, and I believe he can because I know people who lived through the horrors of the holocaust and some of them were justifiably kind of ruined her life and others just came through with an expansive view of humanity that I think is kind of miraculous and beautiful.

So if somebody like Josey can do that, so can the rest of us.

We wanted to talk a little bit more about Josey and why you decided to include his story in this novel.

As you mentioned earlier, Alex was unaware of what happened during the holocaust, whereas Maya-Jade knew much more of what happened, probably mostly because of her Jewish mother.

Why do you think it's still so important for young people to learn about the holocaust?

Well, because I think you can't understand current history without understanding what came before.

One of my daughter's history teachers used to start in the present and move backwards.

They would start with Black Lives Matter and then move backwards to the Civil War and Reconstruction to understand how we got from here to there.

I think particularly what's going on today in the Middle East, without getting too much into it, without understanding this huge traumatic event that happened to Jewish people, it's very difficult to understand so much.

I think that that holds true for everybody.

I think how can you understand where we are in this place in American history, if you don't know the last 500 years of US history or the slave trade, or the Civil War or Reconstruction or civil rights and Jim Crow, etc.

We have to see this and I do think history becomes a pattern that you repeat as you forget it.

It's not lost on me that we've seen these resurgence, particularly with the neo-Nazis at a time when the people who have lived through that, who personally can speak to it, are pretty much dying off.

I realized that I'm the last generation that probably has any direct connection to people like that.

I knew people firsthand who lived through this, and it's important to make sure those stories continue to be told so that we understand the complicated place we find ourselves in, and so that we can learn from the mistakes of the past and try to do better in the future.

Absolutely.

To go to a lighter topic, you also explored the idea of knowing love and then losing it or losing love and then finding it again.

Why did you want to emphasize the importance of love?

because it is everything.

I think we always talk about losing love and finding it, and it's so often in the context of romantic love.

But one of the things that you notice when you visit assisted living facilities is just how much loneliness there is, because these are people that, I'm getting toward the edge of empty nesting as a parent, and it's just like you spend your life with these young people and you try and marinate them in love, and the love comes back and it's great, and then increasingly they're not there.

I can only imagine after a life of this and losing maybe a lifetime partner or children being far away and busy with their own lives, you have all this love to give, never mind being the recipient of love, you have all this love to give, and where does it go?

Love is meant to be spent, it's meant to be luxuriated on other people or other things or other aspects of your life.

I really thought that that was important to see.

The loneliness and the clickiness of the Assetto Living Facilities when I used to go visit Oli, it reminded me of middle school.

Who sits at whose table, who's in with this one, who's in with that, and also just that aching desire to belong and to have your people.

It was both amusing and interesting and a little disconcerting that it comes back around again.

I think that there is this parallel because when you're a tween, you're coming at this out of the age where it's totally okay to just freely love your parents, love your grandparents, love your teachers, get that love to some place where that starts to feel a little cringy and you don't know where it is and hopefully, if all goes well, you come out the other side of it.

But I think it can be a hard place to be because we still need that love.

We need to receive it and we need to be able to give it.

When you don't have a place to do it, it causes a problem and Alex has seen that, both with his mother who he has not seen in a year, but with all of these people who he's meeting at Shady Glen who used to have all these people around them to love.

Now, we're isolated.

Alex's presence at Shady Glen actually starts to create almost a little mini community there, which makes everybody's lives better.

That's another thing about inviting somebody who did a bad thing to maybe rise to the occasion of his life.

It not only helps Alex, it helps Josey, it helps Maya-Jade, it helps Mina, it helps the other people in that world.

So that is the sort of consequential exponential growth of generosity and love and kindness when you put it out there in the world.

That's beautiful.

Yes.

Beautifully said.

I love to see how that community grows throughout the book.

You also discuss medical conditions like dementia and mental illnesses with honesty and compassion, and you showed the importance of therapy for some of the characters.

Why did you decide to include those parts of the novel?

because those are a part of life.

I remember when I was little and I went to see, when one of my grandmothers went into an old age home, I found it so scary.

I know that when we used to go visit my mother-in-law, when she was in assisted living facility, my youngest daughter found it a little disconcerting.

Until she just kind of realized, oh, these are people, right?

These are people and this is what sometimes happens.

And relax, I think, sort of just become desensitized to this.

So it doesn't seem sort of scary, which I think only adds to the isolation.

I think people have a real discomfort.

When I tell people I love assisted living facilities, they're like, what?

So young people, if they are lucky, they have grandparents and they have great grandparents.

And eventually those people are going to start to diminish and they will have dementia and other issues.

And I think the more that we can just kind of accept that this is part of the human condition and get sort of get over that initial sort of like it factor, it helps everyone.

Similarly with mental health and mental illness, like we are all humans, we all get sick at times in our life.

We catch colds, we have physical ailments, and at times we all have mental ailments that have to be dealt with.

And I think like we should see that the same as a strep throat, the same as like a badge of anxiety.

It is something that's going on biochemically with your body, and there are ways that you can deal with it.

And so Maya-Jade is really suffering with anxiety, and she's very upfront about it.

And she goes to therapy.

And I think that is very important to acknowledge.

I go to therapy, I take Lexapro.

I will tell anybody who wants to know because these things have made my life so much better being able to treat them.

And also because it was no fault of my own.

When I didn't, it wasn't because I was a subpar person.

It's just something that happened with me biochemically.

And when I got older, it got worse.

And I started to deal with it.

And it's wonderful.

It opened me back up again.

So I just want to kind of like normalize the things that are going to normally happen in our lives and the lives of children anyhow.

We don't need to protect them from this realities.

We noticed that you provide resources for educators on your website about the holocaust, Operation Rise, and intergenerational learning.

Your book also suggests several texts for people to read about the holocaust.

Would you mind sharing your goals for providing information about these topics?

Absolutely.

Well, there's so many wonderful middle-grade stories about age-appropriate stories, about that time in history, both nonfiction and fiction.

And a lot of them I utilized when I was writing.

So, you know, in addition to sort of giving the drier bibliography of things that I did for research, I wanted to include the bibliography for any young reader who finishes this book.

I was like, I want to read more in this world.

But I also wanted to sort of give up, you know, educators, you know, it just felt like it was rich with possibility, opportunity, sorry, Alex, in multiple ways.

I mean, I think some schools have a holocaust curriculum.

Like I said, there's plenty out there for that.

I sort of, you know, if you want to add this, great.

But I really think that, you know, Operation Rise is what Alex and Maya-Jade call a little project that they do.

And we're hoping to provide a framework for young people to kind of really support and validate one another as they're looking for opportunities again to rise to the occasion of their life and talk about what that means and how it feels.

And then also the intergenerational friendship is so key to this book, between Alex and Josey.

And we really, I really wanted to kind of encourage this because I think I, one of the reasons I'm so obsessed with with older people and spent time volunteering in assisted living facilities is cause my grandparents all died before I got to know them as actual people.

They were just sort of like the shadowy grandparent presence.

And I knew that my mother's parents had, you know, escaped the war and all of this, but I did not know them as like these deeply complex individuals who had this incredible inner lives and who's, you know, trappings of their lives were certainly very different in terms of like technology, what have you, but whose desires and dreams and goals and things that they came up against with were very similar, like people are people are people are people.

So at a time, I think when young people really start to maybe pull away from their parents a little bit and more toward their teen group, I think it's so important for them to have other adults in their life who they can have these anchor relationships with, and grandparents and elders seem so perfect for that, and there is this epidemic of loneliness, I think, in our country.

So we really created some super fun programming, including this pamphlet that's a guide to understanding your olds, and a guide to understanding your youngs.

We're going to make available for educators to print out, and it has funny slang stuff.

But then as you get further into it, it starts to have these open-ended questions that young people can ask the elders in their life and vice versa.

Then it ends with these activities they can do together.

This idea of getting in beyond those conversations of like, what are you doing in school?

What is life like before the Internet?

To try and get them through to the human grist of what it was like.

because I know whenever I have conversations like that with older people, even with my parents now who are in their 80s, there's such a there there.

I don't want to say that all people are wise, but they definitely have wisdom by didn't have been alive a long time.

I just think, let's all tap into that, and let's encourage young people to do that, and let's see if there's places in curriculum that we can do that, and work with groups in our community, bring in grandparents or just bring kids into a city living facility and see if there are opportunities for a lived history lessons as well as emotional intelligence, real empathy lessons, and getting younger people may be comfortable with something that initially gives them discomfort because that is something you can do.

Discomfort is this fleeting thing and you can move past it, and when you see on the other side of that, can often be quite transcendent.

That's wonderful.

Thank you.

One more thing before we let you go, since we as a podcast like to read banned books and discuss banned books, we were curious whether your book, Frankie & Bug, which is about a trans youth, had gotten any pushback.

Yes, it has, of course.

It's so funny how things have changed because before, the sort of latest bout of book banning, really targeting queer BIPOC authors above all, and then queer BIPOC stories, there are stories with even queer BIPOC characters in them.

The book of mine that got banned the most was just One Day because it has a steamy sex scene.

It's interesting to see how things have shifted.

It was very clear that most people had not read anything.

They had just tapped that one scene because it's this fairly chaste book about this couple that meets for one day, and then the rest of the book, they're apart and they're looking for each other, and it's really just these coming of age novels of these young people figuring out who they are, and who they want to be, and how they can get back to their better selves.

Yes, short answer is yes, it definitely is one of the books that is challenged the most often among my books.

Well, maybe we can invite you back if we decide to read it as part of our regular podcast.

I would love that.

Finally, Gayle, could you please tell our listeners where they can find you online, and is there anything final that you would like to add about your book before we wrap up?

Let's see.

You can find me online at galeforman.com and I'll spell my name for you because it's tricky.

It's G-A-Y-L-E-F like Frank, O-R-M-A-N, so galeforman.com.

I think at Gayle Forman on Instagram these days is basically the only place you're going to really find me on social media, but also at Operation Rise is also on Instagram.

I believe we have Operation, actually I'm not going to give you the website because I don't know it by heart.

But if you go to galeforman.com, you can get to the Operation Rise website, you can get to the Educator Resource website, and there's also an Operation Rise Instagram where we'll be putting more and more content specifically related to this.

Excellent.

Thank you.

Finally, Gale, thank you so much for talking with us today.

It was so wonderful to hear more about how you wrote this book.

This book touched me deeply and I cried as I finished it.

So thank you so much for writing it too.

Well, thank you for having me on and I really just appreciate all the work that you're doing and so glad to be here.

Lovely to meet you both.

We loved talking with Gayle Forman.

You can find Gayle's website and social media links in the show notes.

Please check out her website to learn more about Operation Rise as well.

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We couldn't have done this podcast without any of them.

Finally, thanks to all of you for reading with us because books are meant to be read.