

Rogue Librarians

Out of Darkness: Interview with Ashley Hope Pérez

Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts: Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians.

We originally planned to discuss *All Boys Aren't Blue* as our next episodes, but, since we had the exciting opportunity to interview Ashley Hope Pérez, the author of *Out of Darkness*, we thought that we would release these new episodes about her book first.

We loved *Out of Darkness*, and we had a fabulous time talking to Ashley. Her responses were so thoughtful and detailed, and they greatly enriched our understanding and appreciation of her wonderful novel. And the whole time she was talking, I was fangirling because I loved her writing so much and it was incredibly exciting to talk to the author of the book. What did you think?

She was so great? I just, I mean the conversation went for almost two hours and we could have kept going.

Absolutely, and I loved it because she was just so human. Like I felt like we could be friends like all of us could just be friends from now on, you know. Yeah, definitely dropping in and uh that sounds great. But yeah I mean I love the fact that she got her hot tea and she sat down in a comfy chair with her cat on her lap, which by the way she sent us a picture of. Um also I thought it was super cool that she um the reason she kept talking to us is because we were talking about the book and not about the banning so specifically or you know, anyway, so lovely.

Which is something I definitely had in mind. I had read a lot of the interviews and listened to the interviews and I didn't want ours to just to rehash the same territory. So I'm so pleased that we achieved that. Yes, yes.

Before we get into the interview, we also wanted to mention that *Out of Darkness* has been banned because of its depictions of abuse and because it was considered sexually explicit since we didn't explicitly mention those reasons during the interview.

Yeah, we decided that the interview hits a lot of the points that our usual first episode would hit, but it's not as organized. So just a brief uh explanation of the book's journey. It was published in 2015 and it got rave reviews and won all kinds of awards. It was a Printz honor book. There really was no pushback, which Ashley said, you know, surprised her almost. Uh and then it wasn't until 2021, so over five years later, um that in September there was a viral video with a woman reading at a school board meeting. Um, a chapter that is um, to summarize it is the boys at the school kind of sexualizing our main character in their in their own minds sort of written as a collective. And so it's very uncomfortable but this parent held it out of context and um ranted at a school board meeting and it went viral. And then Ashley had an amazing response where she kind of point by point talked about the things that we as librarians always want to address when someone is challenging a book and she did it beautifully. And that's when all the bad things started. So I just thought it was interesting that it wasn't until it was publicized in this very viral moment way that it became nothing.

Well, I think it's likely that the banning started earlier that year, since it became the fourth most banned book in 2021. But I think you're right, Dorothy, that that viral video probably spread it to a lot more schools.

For sure. For sure. And thank you so much for pointing those out, Alanna and Dorothy. Um I did want to mention to our listeners that if you are interested in checking out either of these videos, I believe they're both posted on Ashley Hope Pérez's personal um well, professional web page and their links there. Um so just to move along, we'll discuss lots of reasons that we believe the book is important in the interview. So without further ado here is our interview with Ashley Hope Pérez.

Today we are absolutely thrilled to be talking to Ashley Hope Pérez about *Out of Darkness*, which is one of the most beautiful and heartbreaking books that we've read. It was also the fourth-most-challenged book in 2021, and it has been banned in many school districts across the country. Dr. Pérez is Assistant Professor of Comparative Studies at The Ohio State University. In addition to studying Spanish language, bilingual, and Latina and Latino literary

production in the US, she's preparing work on the legacy of children's writing by major Latin American authors. As a literacy advocate, she seeks to foster meaningful reading and writing experiences, especially among Latina and Latino children and teenagers. Dr. Pérez is the author of three novels. Her most recent novel, *Out of Darkness*, received a 2016 Printz Honor for excellence in young adult literature and won the 2016 Tomás Rivera Book Award and the 2016 Américas Book Award. Ashley, thank you so much for being here today.

It's such a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Oh, you're welcome. We have so many questions about your book and your experiences. But we thought we might start with a few questions just about your background. What was one of the most influential books that you read when you were growing up?

Oh, you know, that's a great that's a great question. I feel like I wish I'd had my notebook handy with my list of every book I've ever read, but I'll just name a couple. I mean, I read I remember and I think this is a relevant one because of the book banning stuff. I remember reading *The Handmaid's Tale* when I was a freshman in high school and I was also really into darkroom photography. So, I read that book in the dark room mostly. And I remember, I remember so many words I learned like the word palimpsest and just really being enthralled with the whole, with the with the what the big what ifs of that novel. And also, I grew up in a very conservative community in a bible church. And so the kind of, you know, the connections between the worldview that was around me and the kind of, you know, what is the what is the horrible possible extension of some of these ways of thinking about women and um choice that was really powerful to me. And I think I had a lot of admiration for, you know, just just the possibility of writing things that challenge those very frames.

I am a huge Atwood fan that was a big college book for me. And Margaret Atwood has said nothing that she writes that people consider science fiction is not already happening somewhere at some level. So, yeah, that's what makes it so chilling. Yeah. Well, yeah, well, um Ashley, that sort of leads us into the next question we have for you, which is um how did you become a writer? Because clearly you indicated that reading *The Handmaid's Tale* really made you think about things. Um So how did you become a writer? And then the follow up to that is how did you decide to write young adult novels?

Thank you for those questions. I think that I've been writing, you know, I have somewhere those notebooks of like bad middle school poetry um that I I don't know if everyone has them, but I hope mostly everyone has them. But you know, I feel like, yes, they're bad poems, but also that experience of yourself as as a creator. It's just such a, I don't know, it's such a sweet and beautiful thing. I don't know, I don't know that everyone has those middle school notebooks and my middle schooler doesn't seem to want to write any poetry, write down anything at all. Give him journals. He's like, that's, I don't what do you what do you want me to do with this? But I guess I think I knew that I was gonna write things and I don't know, I'm trying to think, I still think back on writing college application essays as just a really formative experience just because there was so much like that was such high stakes, like such a high stakes situation. Uh and I was fortunate enough to get like a full a full scholarship to for the first two years of college, this little liberal arts college in Massachusetts called Simon's Rock. I left East Texas when I was 16, I was out of there. And I mean I think I just but I but I think it was the essays, you know, it was a sense of being really invested in giving, creating something powerful, even in the sort of with the cheesy kinds of prompts that you get. And I don't know, I started taking creative writing classes um my first year in college and I never stopped and I remember really distinctly when I had transferred to the University of Texas at Austin when my two year scholarship ran out, I was like, okay, it's been fun. Um I guess I'm gonna go where it's affordable, but I remember what it was like, I would apply, I would submit stuff to any writing competition that was free. And the English Department as an English major had one, and in the fall it was only for undergraduates and in the spring it was undergraduates and people in the MFA program. And I remember that being this big deal that I one thing, you know, like I won things in the spring because that was when the writers could submit, but there was one that that one time there was a time I got enough, like I earned enough from these contests to pay my rent, which was like \$500, but you know what I mean? It wasn't like a lot of money, but I was so, it was like so exciting. So I think that, you know, I took myself, I never I know there wasn't a time that I didn't take myself seriously as a writer I did and I really love literature and language. Um I don't think I had any sense of myself as someone who might become an author for young adults until I was a high school English teacher in Houston. And just so many of my conversations that were transformative for them and for me happened in our school library, especially around the kinds of books that they wanted, but that actually had not been written at that time. I mean in 2004 we were just in such a different place in terms of what kind of representation uh of experiences of identities was available. And uh so I part of how I came to center Latinx experiences in my fiction was my students were predominantly Latinx. Uh and I was listening to them and wanted to translate, you

know, the stories that they were telling me into books that people could find on the shelf. So there's a lot, I mean the book banning stuff really hits close to home because I know exactly how important it is for the book to be there where the teacher and the and the teen are having the conversation and a book that's not there in the library for some kids that just might as well not exist. And so I feel it's part of what um animates my engagement, my continued engagement with these conversations and these, you know, answering the same, not that you're asking me the same question, but I've answered some questions many many times, but because you know, it doesn't stop mattering for young people. So I really became an author of young adult fiction because my students were the audience that mattered most to me and continue to be the audience that matters most to me. I mean they live in tupperware in my imagination. So they're still 17 and 18 even though they're in their thirties, they're like, you know, like 30 for 35 years old now. But um you know, they still they're still the readers I envision um and the reader who's the readers who I want to find out that they are actually interested in literature, they just hadn't come upon the right books. And I hate that all the book banning means a lot of young people are just having those opportunities to find the book that will make them a reader um curtailed those opportunities are you know, getting packed up, getting packed up and put in the store room.

Yeah, yeah, you kind of answered my next question which was going to be about that experience at Cesar E. Chavez High School and how it shaped, you know, your work. Um So I don't know if you have anything to add on like, an anecdote about a particular book that was discussed then, or that was missing at that point.

I mean, my students hated the way how wholesome everything was and especially not that, you know, there was, there's there's there's been great, there have been great books, but especially books about like non-dominant, non-white experiences, they're just like, yeah, this book makes it seem like you get a scholarship and your life, everything's fine like that, like that does not undo the challenges that I have. So I want a book that shows that, and that was my first, my first novel was basically that book, which was showing like a pretty high achieving um young woman navigating all the expectations of her family. It's totally my kids' school, their community, the parks where they, you know, practice soccer, like it just was the book for them. Um And I think that that was that I wrote that first draft of what can't wait the last year I taught at Chavez and I was teaching all seniors that year, so it was kind of like my graduation present to them. Um and I had a student named Anthony who he and his friend, Jesus, like got stuck in my class. They

were actually in a different, like we had these sort of, they were kind of like modeled on majors, but they had these little sub, I don't know, communities in the high school and they were from, not from the health sciences one where I taught, but they got stuck in my English class and they hated it because they had to like do work, but they got really into it. And then, and then I had made the draft of the novel available for anybody who wanted to read it, not it wasn't like required, but Anthony like read it and wrote me this whole letter that he gave to me and then this wadded up, you know, you you could tell he never passed a note that didn't end up in the trash can because it looked just like a paper ball, you know what I mean? It was really, really sweet. I mean, just having him as a reader and having him share that, that was the first book he ever read because he wanted to not because somebody made him and you know, it was incredibly moving and inspiring. And I still, I mean I still hold on to that, I often tell people that is when I felt like an author, an author is someone who writes things and shares those things with the public and I felt like I had readers who really mattered and that was long before there was many drafts before that became a published novel, but it really mattered and I think that that kind of that sense of connection and what are the ways that writers reach out through the world, the words that they string together in the worlds that they evoke, and the way that that, you know what that means for readers who are seeking to connect or who are open to different perspectives and experiences and you know, it's just such a powerful thing that happens in the shared imaginative space of a book.

Well said. Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Um the next question I have for you is um we understand you study Spanish language, bilingual, and Latina/Latino literary production in the US. Um could you give us a sense of the history of books published in the US that feature Latina and Latino characters?

Yeah. Well I'm not. I mean my, okay, so I coordinate this World Literatures program, I do. That's one of my areas of research and I'm really interested in um youth literatures and the varying traditions around that. I was a I was a bilingual literacy tutor when I was in college and that was really another experience that shaped me, you know, being being quote underperforming schools and seeing what what was then No Child Left Behind was what it meant for people before, even before I was the person at the front of the classroom. But you know, there's it's really interesting in the U.S. and in bilingual programs there's such a there's even in where even where there are bilingual programs, not ESOL programs, the basic logic is one of substitution and subtraction, you know you gradually you gradually shift the proportions from Spanish to

English. And then once kids can do academic school work in English they do it in English and they they you know like Spanish is valued insofar as it's a bridge to English but really that's it. Um And you know and that's not like a malicious on the part of anybody any one person but it's one of those structural and systemic um harms because young young people lose their lose cultural and linguistic resources. And even what in my experience as a bilingual literacy tutor um even what Spanish they're experiencing is almost always really crappy translations from mainstream English children's literature. And so that I mean and again this is one of those things this has shifted a lot. I was a I was a literacy tutor in like 2002 so we're talking it's been a while that's improved but not too much. I mean I read I read books I read children's books to my kids, my younger son still sometimes in Spanish when he'll let me and you know often if there's a translation I'm like correcting it a lot not because it's it's like wrong but it's not idiomatic, it doesn't sound right it's not pretty. Um and so I think that even when kids are in bilingual programs often they're getting a kind of impoverished encounter with Spanish as a literary language. Um so, you know, my academic work, I'm just finishing a book on um what I called deformative fictions in Latin American literature. And these are really difficult texts like people want to ban *Out of Darkness*, like these are people who have never read Roberto Bolano's *2666*, you know what I mean? But I think that I think that one of the things that I I'm interested in is, you know, what are the, what are the bridges for folks into spaces of imaginative engagement and what are the roadblocks? And I think for for bilingual or for, you know, for people kids in the us whose home language is Spanish um lack of al access to Spanish as a literary, which is one of those barriers to to experiencing the incredible wealth of literature written, you know, in Spanish around the world, but including inside the United States. Right?

Yeah, it just makes me sad. Um I know that in my library, one of the things that um one of our collection development focuses right now is to try and get more of a bilingual collection and for it to not be translations, but actual literature. Um and so we're hoping to get um you know, some advisors who will help us with building that collection and um anyway, um so thank you for that. Um we're going to go ahead and move right on into discussing the book itself right now. And um we were thinking that actually you might be just the perfect person to give our listeners a summary of *Out of Darkness* in your own words.

That's hilarious because it's one of the things I love about my career stage; I don't have to pitch books anymore. Like I don't have to do because I mean I often tell people, I'm like, you do realize having a novelist summarize anything is like the worst idea ever because there are

reasons we're novelists, not, you know, not journalists, you can write an article, but no, I can, I can, it's just not my strong suit. So, okay, I've been, I'm teasing because it really, it's one of those things I have to really think hard about because I'll start rambling about research blah blah blah. But okay, so *Out of Darkness* is set in 1936 East Texas in the oil field community of New London. And it centers on a love story between Naomi Vargas, who is a young woman from San Antonio, and Washington Fuller, who goes by Wash, who is a young black man in the community she moves to. Um and this is the love story, and they're the stories of their families and what it is to navigate the racial dynamics of this, you know, very black and white space, particularly for Naomi as a Mexican American—that's really the core of the story. But what was my hook into this time and place and what is one of the major events in the novel is the 1937 New London school explosion, which most people don't know about because silencing is not just the work of book banners. Um, but in 1937 this, this school, there was a natural gas explosion, and they don't actually know for sure how many people died, but it was, it was at least 290 people. They don't know because some people in this oil field community just like packed up their families and the bodies of their dead children and drove away. So there was kind of a way of, they didn't know who all was in the building and they couldn't know for sure who all might, who all was killed or just left the community and because it was an explosion, you know, people were identifying their children with scraps of clothing and, you know, birthmarks not, they were not um always bodies for them to bury. So it's a really devastating and horrific event. Um it was something that I learned about in my in my teens or twenties, like I never learned about it in, in Texas history or anything and I grew up, I mean, my dad had a veterinary clinic like five minutes or so from New London, but I did not have any sense that, that a tragedy of that scale had, had happened. And that's, you know, that's something we could talk about a little bit more about like the kinds of silencing that occurs around collective traumas, as well as individual traumas, and the, the additional layer of harm that comes from the silencing of trauma, which is some one of the things that for me makes banning this book especially, you know, painful because you know, it's response, I mean, the book in many ways, um, is a response to some of the silencing around the explosion. But more so the ways that when I was researching the explosion and sort of trying to get a sense of how I might write about the communities that I care about the most in this context, people acted like I was crazy to ask what the explosion had meant for the, like the black Americans in the community because it was a white school that exploded and it was as if it didn't have any bearing, but I could not stop thinking about what does it mean to have your kids be spared from this horrible disaster because they were denied access to what was at the time, one of the best funded public

schools in the country because of oil revenues. So I mean, this was like, you know, this country school district, but they had, they had the first night lights for their football games. They had college level courses, they had foreign languages, they had band instruments for any kid who wanted to play a band instrument, sports uniforms, things that were unimaginable in 1937 in other parts of the country because of the depression.

Well, you still did an excellent job with your summary. And um, our next question was actually about the explosion. So why did you choose to focus on this event?

I think I was surprised when I, when I was, when I was learning about it a little bit more in my twenties, I was just surprised nobody had done it yet, because it's it's, I mean, there were so many there, you know, I wrote a novel about this event. There are novels, you know, too that were possible. There were multiple possibilities. There were just so many powerful, um, and heartbreaking stories around it. But um, I think that I had my eye on this event and kind of had a sense of growing into it and not recognizing like this is not a book to try to write my first book about, you know, this is not the book I'm going to try to write as my first book. Um, but I, I, I guess because my, my dad, my dad grew up in Electro, Texas, which is another oil town and or was actually, there was, they had a major, like, I can't remember a plant exploded there. These things, one of the interesting things about explosions is that an oil field communities. That's a thing that happens, but they're just usually not this scale. Um, and so I guess what I was, I guess I feel a sense of connection even though, you know, my parents moved to the community as adults. Um, my dad grew up around roughnecks and you know, my grandfather worked for oil and gas his entire life. And I don't know, I think that I remember hearing my grandmother tell me about a woman in her church growing up and that she was the saddest person she'd ever met. Um, and I remember, I can't remember what her first name, but the last name was Busby and I remember it was, I mean she told me she lost, she lost her child in an explosion. And when I was doing research in New London and in some of the historical archives in Texas, I found, I mean, I came across that name in the materials. So it's just, I don't know, there's just different, different connections, but just a lot of dramatic possibilities and, and novelists were junkies for a good dramatic setup, that's usually my way in a situation and I don't know what the story is, but I'm confident. And also like if this is the situation, there's a story here.

Yeah. Now that makes a lot of sense. You mentioned the silence surrounding the event even when you were growing up. So, um, could you tell us a little bit more about the research process and the kinds of sources that you were able to find?

Yeah. So I, I think that in the, I think it was around the year 2000 that, that some of the survivors started forming some like create doing kind of like reunion type things and sharing stories and one of the tragic, I mean, really heartbreaking things about that was just how many, how many people had different stories they carried in themselves about how they were responsible. You know, things like, several of these are in the book in different ways. Um, the, the, the super, the real superintendent did, you know, like his kid wanted to basically leave school early to go to a sporting event. Um, you know, there are a lot of details about the explosion that don't factor into the novel, but um, but, but he said, no, you know, look bad. I'm the principal or whatever. Um, and he died. Um, the thing of people switching seats was another thing, you know, another source of deep distress. Um, people having sent the story, you know, in the, in the novel, Naomi sends her siblings back to class, they're sort of cutting class to do this little, um, this, this, you know, something she's upset about. But the, but the, that she's the one to send them back into the building that, you know, just, um, shortly thereafter explodes is something that real people carried, you know, that I sent my, you know, my little brother was skipping class and I sent him back and this is what happened. Um, you know, and then there were other things like somebody who would always kick a pipe or someone who stole something that day. But because there was really no support for those folks around processing what happened in the 1930s. It was just like they actually told the adults in the community, um, told the senior class when the kids got together a month after the explosion and wanted to do like a memorial. They just, they said no and they told them they needed to move on with their lives. You know, can you, you know, so that kind of logic is what traps people alone with these stories and their stories that any loving person, what it could have helped relieve them of. But when the practice is, you just don't talk about it, you don't get that support. Um, so by the time I was writing there, things had changed. I mean, kids in that community did learn about the explosion. And there was actually even a little museum, there is a little museum in New London. Um, and the, you know, I used some of the archives that Stephen F. Austin University and other places and oral histories. One of the more difficult things was just getting a sense of black experience and, and even more so than that, what you know what Mexican American lives might have looked like in this space and this time because most people are like, no, no, nobody. I mean even now in East Texas, people are like, no, those people don't live here and it's not true. I mean people, they, you know those

communities existed, but especially in oilfield communities, what would happen is, you know, you had oil field well paying oilfield jobs for white people. Then you had kind of like ancillary jobs like digging ditches for the pipes and things like that that you know, black men could sometimes get. But then you had a whole service economy that emerged because people who were working those well pay jobs had money to spend. So people, you know, there were different kinds of people attracted to these communities, but just any place where there was work became a lot more diverse by virtue of there being some economic opportunity. Um, so you know, I did a lot of, I did some oral history work. Um, and and I did a lot of comparing communities and especially around black experience in Mexican American experience finding sort of parallel spaces and be so I could say, you know, these are the, these may have been some of the ways that communities would organize themselves or people would make money, extra money. And um, I also just have files and files of like cool information that you just, I think that's one of the hardest things about writing historical fiction is recognizing what the story needs and what readers of the story need as opposed to like what's true and interesting and cool.

Great, well, I do love how many historical details you included in the book, even though I'm sure you didn't get to include all the ones you wanted to. Exactly.

Well, in terms of research my question and since we are a podcast about books that are banned and challenged, um there was the uh quote unquote offending passage that was uh went viral on the video, which uh you know, it definitely made me uncomfortable reading it, but I understand that that was the point, right? We should feel uncomfortable reading it. But I'm curious: how do you go about getting inside the heads of 1930s, teenage boys to try and get to that realism?

Yeah, I mean that, I mean, it's one of those things where I always think that people often are more struck by that with passages like this or my second novel, *The Knife and the Butterfly*, is um I mean, it's about a Salvadoran, like, you know, homeless kid who's a street artist and um you know, just like, you know, he's dropped out of school, his life couldn't be more different, right? And there's a there's a way that readers are surprised, right? Like, how do you, this nice white lady, write this stuff. But I mean, but but so there are some places where it's more notable to folks, but novelists are always like finding the ways of extending our our imaginations and our sensibility outside of our own experience to try to capture, you know, life and action and choice

and thought that other, you know, that's not ours and that and I mean, I think that we could have a whole podcast about what is it, you know, what is it to responsibly right outside of your, you know, your cultural community or all that. But but I always when I teach fiction workshops and these issues come up because they should because I hope you're not just writing about people just like you, whatever your story is, whoever your protagonist is, I always just remind people like everyone, everyone is writing outside of their experience and everyone has a responsibility to think about how they do that. Like what choices are they making. And you know, I think that one of the reasons that people get upset about a book like *Out of Darkness* is that I try to humanize every character. I mean, even the worst characters in this book, I want them to be human in there and they're, you know, the horrors that they inflict. But I am not, I'm centering the stories that have been pushed to the edges and the humanity and the you know, um the experiences I'm most invested in honoring are not the ones that literature has focused on. Um they're not the ones that people are accustomed to seeing protected or or highlighted. So, you know, that that passage in question, there's a series of these passages from the perspective of the gang which is basically, you know, it's not just a male voice, but in that moment it's this is what the boys are thinking, but it's like the choral voice of the high school, the locals and the high school senior class. And the goal was it was kind of funny because yes, it is very uncomfortable. Those passages are, you know, they are like a distillation of racism and misogyny and a lot of really toxic stuff. But the reason that Andrew Carr, my editor, and I decided to do it that way was so that we could cut hundreds of pages of, you know, the kinds of incidents that would be part of Naomi's life, right? So like my choice was to have this one passage where we are like the reader has to swim in the kind of toxic projections that are being put on Naomi's body because she's brown and recognize that is that is her every day at school. Like her body is seen as available because of her racial and ethnic identity. And that's something that really when I hear from real people who are actually reading the book, yes, it's so uncomfortable and distressing. But it's also something that really prompts reflection on how do I look, you know, how do I think about the people around me and you know, likely I'm not thinking in these terms, but what do I need to root out of my imagination or out of my thinking. Um, and particularly for, you know, for white men to think about the intersection of her, you know, her racial and ethnic and gender identity and to think about what their sisters or girlfriends or cousins, you know, deal with sometimes in in sharing space with members, male identified folks. Um, so you know, I mean, that's that's why and then how you get inside that mindset, it's just the same thing I do with everything else. It's just a lot of playing around and trying to see what, you know, what seems right. But also reading stuff, reading interviews, you know, reading

about, you know, hearing the language that people you used at the time, which is why the word cornhole is in there, you know?

Yes. The time specific language... You must have watched my video. I did—it was fantastic. It was fantastic. I just find it so interesting to like hold this up next to when Donald Trump was running for office and the whole thing about grabbing women and I'm like you don't want to read it in a book, but you're okay with it in the mind of your candidate for president. It's so bizarre. Yeah, yeah. Um which is why everyone was so surprised that like nothing ever came of that because this is how we felt when we heard it. We felt the way reading this passage makes you feel you assaulted.

I mean, and I think that I mean what you said about wait a minute, you're fine with this in real life. And that is actually at the core what really lights my fire around this stuff. Because what, what folks are really, you know, it's bonkers to suggest that removing a literary representation of human experience because you think sexual assault is bad for example, uh, does anything to help or protect or support someone who is dealing with that reality? You are just taking away a resource for the for people. The only folks that are being quote unquote protected or that they imagine they're protecting are people with magical youths that have no troubles. Those actually, even the people who think that's true of their own kids. It's not and they live in a world where the people around them will have had a range of experiences, you know, but it is really just really highlights how disingenuous the whole, you know, and we need to protect our innocent youth thing is because it's not about actual kids. And these folks could put a fraction of the energy they're putting and get in removing books towards actually any issue and you know, hunger, sex trafficking, whatever and do some actual bullying, do some actual good, but they're they're this, you know, the concern is just is man is pretend it's not real.

Yeah. Yeah. There's so many holes you can poke in that argument that it's for the kids. I can't even begin to that be a whole hour by itself. Sure. My next question. Uh, I'm gonna quote you from your NPR um essay uh, "to engage honestly with the realities of the time and my character's lives. I had to grapple with systemic racism, personal prejudice, sexual abuse and domestic violence." Um, all of which you do beautifully. I would I would add a few more things into the list, including child molestation, child abuse, violence against minorities, lynching, rape. It's a lot. Which is probably why the review that I read or that's in the front of the book says it will break you into tiny pieces and leave you on the floor. Which was, in fact, my experience. So my

question is why did you know you were going to devastate your readers as much as all that to put that all in there? Or was that just because you know, the characters and the situation tells you what's going to happen?

It's a great question. I mean, to start with, did I know I mean I mm hmm. But where to start? One thing I will say I've had I have held many a reader ran into me at a conference or you know, after a book event is just like, you know, devastated and I mean, and I'm like I am here. I think it takes a lot of bravery to read books that follow truths or stay with truths that we really all wish for otherwise for the characters and for the world. Um and I think that one thing I like to point out not necessarily in the moment of that person sharing their experience, but at some point is that like, I lived inside this world and this experience with my characters for like four years, you know what I mean? So it wasn't pleasant for me either. Um but I also, you know, when I began, I really thought that the explosion was the tragedy and I actually you know how towards the end of the novel Wash has these different ideas about how he could, you know, he and Naomi could have a life together somewhere else. I wrote a lot of those and they sucked like, those endings did not work and why I mean, because it was completely denying the grain of their reality, not just you know, it's not just that it's racist East Texas in the 1930s, it's not just that there's been this explosion which, you know, situations of community disruption crisis, like things that cause distress or comparison like my kid died, your kid didn't um that's that is a that is the crucible for racialized violence. Um and so you know that there was that and then Henry, like, you know, there were at some point, you know, my sons' dad, you know, we, we, I mean we were, I was frustrated at the end of the day of writing and I said something about things like, well what if it's just a tragedy like, and it's just a tragedy? And I was like, no, and it was horrible, but I could tell you, I mean, I felt it, you know, I was like, oh my God, of of course it is. And the other factor as far as you know, why, why name these? You know, why do we have to have all of this harm? You know, it really does the characters. Well, I was trying to write the ending of this book, I was teaching in Paris and it was the same spring that Trayvon Martin was murdered and it was the kind of wreck, I mean, I just remember that piercing my fantasies for Wash, right? Because how the heck was about to say something else, but I'm trying to behave how the heck was Wash in 1937 with those factors I just named going to get out when Trayvon Martin cannot walk down the sidewalk in 2010, was it 2012? Um you know, and so it was, it was 2012, my kiddo was two, yeah, so it was sort of this like, I can't pretend like that that that felt wrong, not just for my characters but wrong for the reckoning we needed to be doing in the present and I and I was terrified. I mean this, like I wrote this book before Black Lives Matter was a hashtag or a

movement. And so, but I think part of what was so shocking actually when the book was published was how much people got why I mean, this book wasn't even challenged until 2021, from 2015 to 2021. It was people were just reading the book, you know what I mean? So you know that that the moment really changed the moment changed a lot. But when it was published and I think that's why I got the attention that it did, it was, it made sense to people because this is, these are the histories that are, are the ugly roots of why Trayvon Martin wasn't safe walking down the street, why Tamir Rice, you know, and we could say we could spend the rest of the podcast saying all the names that we should. Um, so I think that, that I think as far as like why, you know why that all of those factors, one last thing I'll say for you, um, maybe want to take us in a different direction is one thing that book banning folks have emphasized and you know, their haphazard, um, justifications. This is the fact of the sexual abuse and sexual assault. Every single one of my books addresses sexual abuse or sexual assault in some way. Both because I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, um, and have experienced sexual assault and because my students, I taught, I think I mentioned, I taught in this health sciences academy in a title one school, it was nothing prestigious. Um, but they had predominantly female students and so many of my students had experienced a range of violations that they did not have even beginning vocabulary for. And so one of the things whenever people try to make to make the claim that this might be triggering to survivors or different things one any literature can be triggered, and that's true, and it's really important for people to have support but not addressing realities. And literature subtracts resources. Because what I saw with my students is that being able to see harm represented as harm and be able to name it as harm for characters was often a way for them to begin to speak about something that had happened to them. And um, I know in my in my own lived experience, i it's very difficult, especially in cases of incest to name what's happening or what has happened. Um, so, you know, I'm going to keep writing about those things, but I want to I want to sit down with all of the articles about trauma processing and supporting survivors and ask those people to answer for that. People who have written to me and call me a groomer and like you know all these horrible things to say, what do you know about actually supporting survivors because what we know about supporting survivors says that you're going to cause harm by taking books away.

Yeah, yeah. And you know, thank you for doing that and addressing those. In my experience, kids who have experienced any particular kind of trauma are drawn to those books about it um whether it's trans experience or cutting or depression, you know, they want to read stories of people like themselves. Yeah. Don't we all? Yeah.

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. We do. Um and I what you just said that so beautifully, so thank you for that beautiful um description there. Um one of the most interesting things that um maybe I learned in the book was about the attempt to whitewash the Latinx children. Um yeah and in a sense Henry was trying to pretend his kids weren't Latinx, particularly the twins. Um and you know I remember when he first found out that Naomi was not allowed to shop at the store that you know that he wanted her to go to that she had to go over to the other town to get food and that whole reaction. So um and I'm just curious how how common was this practice in the thirties of whitewashing um Latinx children and passing yeah, yeah, I mean what ways does it harm the children involved which because obviously it does.

Yeah, I mean, you know, there's so much, there's so many layers of harm um in in school. And and there's only just the tip of the iceberg represented in the novel about the, you know, the threefold school segregation practices in places like in places like San Antonio or in the valley, places where there were significant Mexican American or Latinx communities, you know, having a white school, having a black school, quote, unquote colored school and having a quote unquote Mexican school. Of course not all the kids, most of those kids were Americans in most cases. Um you know, the classic phrase, like, my family didn't cross the border, the border crossed us, you know? Um but the, I mean, so it's interesting because there's such a there's such a knot and you can kind of see the complexity of it and how, for example, Naomi's grandmother responds to the situation and basically says, you know, you can't come back home, you what's what there is for you in the world, is there in East Texas? Um the the yes Henry, as a white man looks bad for for just, you know, trying to just passing off the kids as as white and not caring about their um their cultural background or anything, but that's like that wasn't even something that would have registered as harmful to anyone at the time. It was just, I mean, you know, the white dominance, it was just obvious to people that that you would want to be identified as white. Um And and you know it's something that uh you know that it's something that families um that people of color navigated to in their families if they had lightness too there were folks who were lighter or could pass more easily. Um That was something that you created real pain and conflict and you know for the for the individuals who could pass but that often was seen as the best course of action at least by others to access privilege to access opportunities for advancement. So you know it's not surprising to me at all um that that folks did this and as far as like how common one of the I I found um I found a death certificate for a child named Juanita. Um It was her last name was H. E. R. R. O. N. So weird way to spell heron, right? But

that's how people would have said it. But it's a Spanish last name. Herron. Um And I you know the death certificate did not indicate her background. I found a photo of her. I mean it was it was sort of the thing that started me asking how my Mexican American child have ended up in the school. Um And then I kind of worked with that with the historical um the set of circumstances but what the the other the other thing there was for example, a family that had children killed in the explosion. Their last name is Drinkwater. And one thing that also happened with, with Native kids, right? I mean, there was, we know all of the horrors of residential schools and you know, stripping away culture, but also in some spaces, families chose to slip in to, to the white schooling system for opportunities for their kids. And I think especially in a place like New London where this school was really special. Um, and there was also just a lot of movement in the community, a lot of people from outside showing up, um, that it created more possibility for that than in some, you know, if, if this, if we were reading, um, if we were reading about experiences in 1910 in this community, everybody would know who everybody was and who their people were and you couldn't do that. But because of the oil boom, it was, it was, there was a lot more um porousness to the community. Um, last thing about passing, a lot of people don't know the, the unique history of school segregation for Latinx kids in the United States, but one of the things that was uniquely harmful, whereas black kids had, you know, I mean, underfunded under resourced schools, but they were taught by black teachers, Mexican American and Latinx kids were almost always taught by white teachers, who thought that they had a shitty placement and you know, I mean not, you know, of course, I'm sure there were exceptions, but you know, it wasn't uh, it wasn't a valued position and they were taught very little, I mean they were taught basic literate, quote unquote citizenship, job skills. You know, Naomi mentioned something about stuffing mattresses or shelling pecans at some at some point, but the Mexican schools didn't go past elementary school and there were practices like half grades, basically this idea that Mexican American kids weren't smart enough to do a whole grade of regular school, so they split the grades. And so by the time you finished fifth grade, you were way too old for middle school and there was no middle school where you could enroll. So when you talk about Hispanic dropout, there's a history there, you know what I mean? Like that's a pattern that didn't come out of nowhere, you know, that was enforced by segregation practices. And the ways the only real exceptions to that were, you know, some, some places that had a large enough population would have like would have a high school. And then those places like where I taught in Houston, the only Mexican American kids who went to high school were just light skinned enough to enroll. Um, and so, you know, it's, it's just really sobering, but it

is like, it is something that feels surprising to us now, but wouldn't have, you know, wouldn't have caused anyone to think to think twice at the time that he would do that.

Yeah, that's fascinating and so sad. Um, we wanted to talk a little bit more about the challenges your book has faced, but before we do that, um as we mentioned at the beginning, we said that your book was very well received when it was published and it received several awards. Can you give us a sense of how young readers have responded to the book? Have they told you how much it meant to them or how it has helped them with various issues?

Yes, thank you for asking that question. Um, yeah, I've never heard. I mean, of course, you know, young people, why would they, why would you take the time to reach out to an author whose book you hated? But maybe, I don't know, but I've only when it comes to real readers actually adult or otherwise, but certainly the young people who take the time to write to me, which I love. Um there, so they make me so proud and encouraged. And I think that, you know, the way that the the different, really smart moves that they make as readers, uh, just amaze me. And so, I mean, you know, the responses run the spectrum from, you know, I love, I love I love this family and I like my heart is broken. And also I just want to start reading it again. You know, that kind of just like, this is my experience as a reader too a lot. I mean thoughts about um history, like how important it is to them to have a chance to look at like to be, to be entrusted with truthful, honest representations of some unpleasant aspects of our, of our history in this country. I also have have definitely heard from survivors of sexual assault and sexual abuse who just meant so much to them that Naomi in spite of the harm she's experienced, gets to have joy and connection in her body and be feel respected and held by washes love. Um, that's something that was really important to me. And so it really meant a lot to hear that from real readers that that that that mattered to them. Um, I mentioned before, you know what it is for some white readers to read this book and face in a much more visceral way that the reality of even now the different experience in public space, that some people's bodies get to be safe in public space and some people's bodies are not safe in public space. Um, that is a gendered and racialized reality. But um the last example I'll give, I hate one thing I hate about all of this, not as much as the fact of kids not finding the books in the library, but, selfishly, I haven't done a school visit. I haven't been invited for a single school visit since this all started and I've always done school visits and I love them. I love talking to kids, but I have done these banned book like Zoom calls with book clubs, which is great and one book clubs, student organized book club, the whole conversation they wanted to have around *Out of Darkness*, which was so smart and

interesting, was about consent and you know, instances of you know, just the complete erasure of the idea of consent. Henry never thinks about anybody's consent about anything. And then you know what, what are Naomi's experiences in different spaces and so, you know, you can see how like that the very passage that Kara about lost her shit about or chose, you know, you could tell she's never read the book, right? She would have probably picked something else if she'd read the whole book but that you know that passage is something that that they were talking about in terms of like here, like here the way here are the frames here are the toxic um you know, logics that cause people to to completely um overlook the idea of consent. I mean, those young men, it wasn't consent, right? Didn't even occur to them. And so, you know, having the moment just having the instances and making those comparisons, It was so beautiful to watch them to watch them do that.

That's wonderful and such a oh, I was just going to say that you mentioned how much some students appreciated the fact that Naomi could still experience love and hope with Wash and I thought their love story was so beautiful, and it just made me feel really good when I was reading it too. So I just want to say how much I enjoyed that too. But go ahead Dorothy, sorry.

Tthanks. I was going to say it's such an important thing that needs to be taught to youth the whole idea of consent because you know, there's plenty of these um toxic groups out there that are espousing on the internet, you know what it means to be manly and just all of the toxic masculinity, which I know is a loaded phrase, but you know, to have examples of that they can discuss I think is super important and to piggyback on Alanna also, I did love the love story so much, which is why it was so hard, so hard to read. I have been comparing it to Romeo and Juliet which makes me cry every time and I'm like, well, you know, that's tragic. But add on top of star crossed love this list of things.

I teach *The God of Small Things* in one of my world literature classes, and I sometimes get students from our education, our school of education, and they I mean, you know, I don't know about other places, but because I'm at Ohio State, they often teach *Out of Darkness* in the young adult literature courses and one of my students was like, I don't know if you've all read *The God of Small Things*, but it has a yeah, it has a forbidden love. And you know, there are actually a lot of things going on that I love that book. It was one of the books that I tend to have like a mentor text when I'm writing a book that I'm really reading closely and thinking about, and

one of my students said, you know, there's a lot of conversation going on between *Out of Darkness* and *The God of Small Things* I'm like, Ding, Ding, Ding, you win the literary prize. Yes.

Um actually, I just wanna chime in, you know, with my fellow Rogues and say how much I loved the book. Of the three of us, I think I finished it first and I kept talking to um Dorothy and Alanna and saying have you guys started this book? Have you guys started this book? Oh my God, I need to talk about this because that's how this book is. It's not you know, like I really needed to talk about it because I found that it was, as they both said, beautiful. Um you your writing is beautiful. Um but also I found it hard, not just hard, but triggering for me as well because of so many of the themes that, you know, you cover um in the story. So I just want to leave that there. Um but the question that had popped up for me is, you know, obviously there's there's some symbolism and um, you know, thinking of the cover of the book that shows um the back of the head with the braid down the back and um I've and then obviously the significance of um Naomi saving her mother's braid, um and you know, she wears her hair in the same way. Um I just wondered if you wanted to talk a little bit about the symbolism and significance of hair. Um and is there any lore that has to do with hair that has to do with the Latino/Latinx um, perspective. Um, and then, you know, just to talk about why there end up being two different covers for the book.

You sure? So, oh my gosh, there's so much to work with. I will, I think I'm pretty good at like mapping a little itinerary in my head, but if I forget any part, you can prompt me. But I want to start with the, I wanted, I do want to just comment briefly about the, the degree to which what we encounter in literature can be triggering or can be, um you know, I mean, what Kafka says, the ax, um something like the ax to crack the frozen sea within us. I mean, there's there's a way, right, that beautiful literature is often shattering or devastating. And I mean, at this point, the term trigger, I think sometimes, and I'm not saying you're using it lightly, but I'm saying sometimes people use it lightly. I take very seriously the experience of a bridge, a bridge back to my own trauma, which is like what I think of when I say, well, you know, when I stay trigger, that's what I mean, as a as a feeling of being transported back into, you know, involuntarily into something. And I think that's why I know there are people who think trigger warnings are silly or what I think they're important so that people are informed and I think most of us who carry particular kinds of trauma, it's not, I mean, I don't avoid everything to do with childhood sexual abuse, but I do like to be informed going in. So I have appropriate supports. Um and I think that that's really wise. And I think that's also one of the reasons why it's so important for *Out of*

Darkness to be in schools, because when kids are reading in the context of community, they have access to more supports. I also think people should put down a book if it feels if it doesn't feel safe for them given where they are. And I've certainly done that myself or stop the movie, you know. Um but I think that there's also the other side of it and this is something that only a survivor and an individual person can decide my experience of trauma processing and recovering is that triggers are also bridges to healing. And so it's a question of, you know, that doesn't mean you don't have to take every journey, you know what I mean? So sometimes there's a trigger and we need to say I need to move back from this. I'm going to get care for myself, I'm going to and I'm going to choose not to engage with this right now and that is so appropriate. And also sometimes I have an experience that lets me know I'm going to work with something and I may still be taking a break from the book or the, you know, the play or whatever, but that I, I tend to want to make sure people consider that dimension of the way imaginable work can be triggering because the only, you know, we also missed out on a lot of healing if we're avoiding trying to avoid our triggers. And this is something I mean from my own experience in therapy, like, you know, one of the, one of the hallmarks of PTSD is avoiding triggers, right? And when we have resources for navigating our triggers, we get to move into healthier engagement. So anyway, that was about um, triggering stuff. And um you had also asked, asked about hair. Women's hair is so charged in so many communities certainly it's interesting. I think *Out of Darkness* was first, but there have been a number of books like *I'm Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* has a braid from behind. *The Book of Unknown Americans*, I think, has a cover like that. Um and you know, it is so important in the book. I don't love giving my take on symbolism and stuff just because you know, it gives people the impression that this stuff is like an easter egg that the writer like packed up and tucked in and really those thematic and symbolic resonances they emerge and collaboration with readers. And I love one of the things I love and talking to readers is here, you know, especially classes where they're working with the book, like is hearing what they're what meaning they're making out of the constellation of possibilities that exist even in a book I wrote, they're making really rich interpretations that I didn't anticipate that doesn't mean they're not real, but like for example around water, like the role of water in the in the novel. Um, and then the last bit about covers, many people don't realize this, but authors don't have, unless you have it written into your contract or you're somebody like super famous. We don't control the para-textual materials like the cover, what summary they put on the back or blurbs. Um and so I've been fortunate to have been included in that conversation with my with *The Knife and the Butterfly* and *Out of Darkness*. Um those first covers. So the one with the braid is one I got to see a lot of uh other cover options and we

talked about them and we modified things. When Holiday House bought the paperback rights, they made their own choices for the covers. And I think I got, I asked for a modification like the art original artwork. Um it really looks like Wash and Naomi were like scowling at each other. I was like okay, but they love each other. So can we get a little bit more of a smile going on? Um but that was, you know, that wasn't even like, I didn't even see other designs. Um so that's those were choices that they made. I love the paperback cover. I think it's beautiful. Um I also think it's interesting, you know, because when we talk about the book banning and what does it mean when people, they're standing in school board meetings waving a book that has, you know, that that represents both internally the identities of characters or on the cover with the identity of the author, their, you know, their their name and identity or with images like *Out of Darkness*. Um you know, identities that young people in the community have and that person's holding the book up and calling it bill, like we know from all kinds of materials that folks are, you know, it is the books are just symbols and totems and what is really messaging around which identities, they want to see disappear or not be centered or not be validated. Um so I think that it's been kind of interesting how the cover of the paperback of *Out of Darkness* with, you know, a Mexican American and black American right there on the cover has been um weaponized.

Yeah, thank you for that. I appreciate it, definitely. So we're talking about symbols and you said that you don't really like to say too much about them but which symbols like just you notice them happening as you were writing the book. And I mean the symbols that come to my mind include things like the tree. Yes, it's a big one, the little things that the twins share with each other is one that pops up for me. So just you know, I know these things have a way of coming up out of the subconscious while you're writing, I'm curious if any surprised you.

I mean yeah the tree, I am looking at a lunar calendar and well that one of my dear friends, you know as an artist but it's got a tree and I have I have a tree tattoo. You know, I have trees are very important to me and I think that um the space and I spent a lot of time like determining that my like this that this heart rot, this kind of heart rot can happen in a tree big enough that you know Naomi and Wash really could get inside and stuff. And I got like you know all these like a whole gallery of images of trees um that are like this to sort of to work with. But the idea of, you know both the tree is this space of shelter, right? I mean the woods are the one place where Naomi is Naomi and the twins and Wash are free to form this little family. Um it's and so there's just there's something so powerful there and then you know, also just the way that the way that trees grow, right? And when we think about um you know, you think about trees and what you

can see when when a tree's been cut down, what you can see about its life and the years where there wasn't enough water or the way the hope the tree was injured here, but that you know, all of that is held inside and layered in these ways. And I think I think a lot with characters in terms of um you know what what what readers or even I as the author experience in a given moment, you know, I'm not always at the deepest layer. Um but it's very important to remember that there's that, that's there. Like even someone like Henry, um it really mattered to me to imagine into inward and back in time and and what are the wounds that he carries, you know that are that are there and are part of what he guards against by making the kinds of harmful choices he makes is he's guarding the most wounded places as so many of us are. So I definitely think that the tree really is the tree and you know that just thinking about trees and how they exist in relation to each other is pretty central.

Just hearing you talk about it sort of already deepening my thoughts about it. So to hear you talk about the heart rot and thinking about the community and the perceived safety, but really there's you know, that tree is on its way out, right? Because temporary, right? That shelter is temporary. Yeah.

One of the things I really enjoyed about your book was the fact that it's written from multiple perspectives. And I was wondering how you chose those particular narrators and which ones were easiest and most difficult for you to write from the perspective of.

Great question. Yeah. So in an early so I love the craft stuff and an early um you know when I mean, this book was 100,000 words longer than it is like, you know, 100% longer, probably more than that because I wrote in revision, a lot of new material. But um yeah, you know, just was just a messy thing, you know, and an earlier version that it was a much more like eyeball in the sky written, you know, kind of thing. And one of the things that Andrew Carr and I decided in revision was that you know, we it mattered for it to be mostly third person. There's that those little sections of the gang which are like first person plural. We we this and that but for the most part this is a third person narration but we do move with the geeky, we move into characters, perspectives or situations or experiences um and the geeky like literature professor term for that is focalization. So it's like um you know, we're still it's still third person but we're really close to Naomi or we're really close to Henry or we're really close to um Beto um but or Wash I think is the one I didn't name. Um so one of the things that was interesting to me in doing that was about place and one of the things that you know, if you were to go back you may notice is which

like in which space is different characters are the ones whose perspective we adopt and one of the kind of I kind of created a rule for myself about what who tells who, who are we experiencing things with or whose experience and perspective are we closest to at a given time and why and a lot of it has to do with power and mobility. And so you ask how did I decide who um you know, i it mattered to me for example to have Henry as a focalized character in part because I think that was an important way of accessing some of his humanity, even the ugliest parts of it, but also because I wanted there to be a clear sense of contrast between his mobility and privilege and someone like Wash, right? Think about where Wash can be safely and what, you know the way the way he has to take care and the degree to which Henry never has to take care, right. Um and Naomi, you know, Beto, her, her siblings, you know, a lot of people ask why doesn't Cari get her own section? Beto and Cari are almost always together and because her personality is so dominant, I just decided I'm giving I'm giving this to Beto, he needs this and of course, you know, in the way that I frame things, I am imagine the whole novel as Beto's sort of imaginative reconstruction of what's happened to his family. Um but Beto was valuable to me also as a novelist because kids can go a lot of places, right? So again this question of mobility and what he can over here what he can see and do. Um and then Naomi, you know, one of the things that made her very difficult to write is that she is carrying experiences and losses and there is a there is a lot that she she's a very closed character for me or she was for me as a novelist, I struggled you know, I spent a lot of time finding what in her would lead her to take this tremendous risk of loving Wash, right and I mean a lot of times I do exploratory writing that doesn't even end up in any draft of the novel. I don't I'm just trying to get my character to surprise me or do something and I had plugged her in the space of Henry's house with everybody else there, this is actually in the book, but it's the scene where she ends up like spitting on his pillow and it's this little bit of transgression, right? This little bit of her in acting like refusal or resistance that I'm like, that that is the quality that then, you know, leads her to bring Wash into her tree, right? Like, that is the quality, that sense of this, this can't be what I'm resigned to. Um and so, you know, I'm often I'm often wanting um readers to come to know the characters not just as, you know, like, like people, you know, like people imagine like authors creating a backstory for their characters or whatever, but it's like, very disembodied, like, or, you know, disconnected from social realities. I really want people to come to know the characters as they have their interface with the world, and also in the inner spaces where they're recovering from, you know, when you think about Naomi she's a lot of her time is spent recovering from what is happening to her up in the world, you know, finding a way to carry herself, finding a way to protect herself, finding a way to care for the twins, finding a way to navigate assault or

intrusion or you know, assumption, you know, so I think that moving through, move, being able to move close to these different characters creates a much larger canvas of experience for readers and even the adult perspective, like someone like Henry is important for how we understand the circumstances of our team love, you know, our team lovers.

Yeah, that makes so much sense. Sorry, go ahead Dorothy, I was going to say that Beto was my favorite character and I think I feel more about his journey that I did even of our young lovers, so that was well done. And the thing that sticks with me about Henry is that idea that bad luck follows Henry around. Was there more to that than what ended up in the, in the book?

Yeah, I mean, you know, it's really interesting, I don't think there is more, but for example, Naomi's mom, they're in an earlier draft, I mean, who knows, maybe something, I'll do something with it sometimes. Beautiful pages. And I both agree these are beautiful pages and like, we don't have to have them and we're going to choose not to include them. But there was a lot more about Estella, Naomi's mom. Um but you know, and it's interesting in my um in being coming to be fine my way is that being a writer as this book banning stuff just continues. It's very complicated. But one of the things that I've been exploring is how how do I reclaim *Out of Darkness* because it's really been grabbed by the you know, these, like, right far right-wing folks and mishandled and misused and I don't mean I don't imagine myself writing a sequel and I have another novel that I like, I kind of kind of committed to that some other things that I am working on. But one thing I intend to consider is, you know, what are the what are the narrative afterlives or echoes of *Out of Darkness* that I might explore as a way of insisting on my ownership of this, of this narrative world and not not my ownership against the ownership of readers because I think books ultimately belong to readers, but the people who are banning the books are non-readers, you know, I would really appreciate the chance to have a conversation with anyone willing to read my book. But it's stunning the refusal to read and how how much the book banning is about refusing to read.

Mhm. Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. We had a we had a question um about the book bannings and how how can people who, which I believe, I truly believe the vast majority of the country who do not want books banned. Like, how do we take advantage of that notoriety that comes with the, you know, with the reading of things at school boards that go viral. How do we take advantage of that notoriety to increase? I mean has have your sales gone up since the since this all happened, that's something we always hear? I don't know if it's yes it's not it's not.

I mean okay and this is I promise I won't get agitated because you're asking a million great questions about my book. I hate that question so much because it but it's good to ask it because I will dispel the myth. It's not like book bans do not increase book sales, they end careers. It can there in cases be enough publicity around the book ban that it drives sales. Absolutely if you are Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus*, or Angie Thomas, the author of *The Hate U Give*, um you know. Yeah and even you know for me or for Maia Kobabe, the author of *Gender Queer*, certainly we have there have been purchases of our books that would never have been made without the book banning, but none of that addresses the fundamental harm to kids of not being able to access the books and the fundamental harms to careers. And I will say like you know I'm not a person who relies on school visits for income but I know many authors who do and so if I were such an author this book ban would have been you know these book bans would have undone my livelihood because I haven't done a single school visit. And so I think that there's a way that sometimes I mean and I actually, I was complaining about this interview on Friday because it was so focused on you know, I kept getting questions about the sales and the but you know, but this but that um and I'm just, you know, I mean and I also want to stay, I feel like people need to understand, we're talking about the difference between \$1500 and \$1000 in royalties. We're not talking about \$40,000 or \$2,000, you know what I'm saying? So increases in sales that so you know making \$500 or \$1000 more in a royalty statement. Um that comes with hate mail telling me, I bet I want somebody to take me out back and do these things to me or people sending me messages on Instagram calling me a groomer and a pedophile or I am literally Satan you know like all of that, like I would give back those \$1200 of extra royalties and a heartbeat to get my books back on the and get my life back. You know, have my kids not have to say my son, you're like, did they did they do another thing to your book because I'm crying about, you know something, you know it sucks but but you know. I think that to circle back, so I just feel like I always just have to be clear and I want to say I am a privileged author because I have had a ton of publicity around this issue and what am I, what am I, what's my benefit? \$500 more in royalties in a year or you know what I mean? Um and and then people need to understand there are authors on these lists that have been made the targets by these groups that have not had their book title even mentioned in an article. Not once, they're not in the top 10, they're not in the conversation, but their book sales have taken a hit and there may not have the next contract for a book. And I mean I I have two books that are already sold. So I'm not super worried. I have an editor who loves to work with me. I'm not super worried. But I have I have an anthology that my agents had out on submission that should have been snapped right

up and hasn't sold yet. So, you know, it's like it's the kind of thing that it's the consequences go so much beyond the royalty statement. And um the, I mean truly the impact we are going to see for them, even if we could stop it all today. The chilling impact for the next 5, 10, 15 years in terms of what people will write and what people will publish and what librarians will buy. It is real. It's really happening. Um So what can we do? So you said, well, how can we harness? I think that it is really important to encourage people to read what someone's trying to take away from them. And I think that's a powerful message to the young people find out what they're trying to take away from you. Um, and that's, you know, and that's something that I'm interested in in terms of ways of re-inscribing banned authors into the very libraries where their work has been removed through an anthology, for example. Um, uh, so, you know, there are things that we can do, and adult allies can help young people know what's missing from their library and help give them access if you all want. If y'all know anyone who wants to do this. My dream is for there to be a google form where a kid can fill it out, name their school name, the book that they can't access. And then donors can have already donated money so that they can go pick up that book at the local independent bookstore. Like it's, you know, we'd have these partnerships in different communities. Um, you know, it would just be like, okay, the orders players, the kid picks up the book, they get the access back. Um, and there. And not only that because of course, yes, they could go to the public library. Yes, if they have a credit card or a parent could buy it for them, they can get it online. But the other thing that I think something like that says is that you matter, you finding a story that someone's taken away from your school library matters other people don't think this is okay. People aren't signed with it. So it's one of those things where I'm like, not it because I'm really overwhelmed, but I wish someone would do that and I think people like, people want to do stuff and I think people would want to give money and that would be purposeful because a lot of times people want to buy and mail books, but then it's not reaching the actual kid who wanted it. You know what I mean?

That's a fabulous idea. It really is. Have you recommended it to any of the groups who are trying to do stuff?

Yeah. Yeah. I'm pretty sure I mentioned it to John Friedman at PEN America. I could follow up with him about it. But um, I put it in a, I wrote a thing for *Knowledge Quest*, the school librarian like magazine. Um, I think I mentioned it there and another, but I mean, I think that would be amazing. I think that that would be amazing if someone could, you know, it wouldn't really be that hard. I don't think to organize, but I'm just, I'm just like, I'm not. If I start thinking about it too

much, I will start to trying to do it and I really need to get tenure and I really need to raise my kids and I really need to write my next novel, you know what I mean? But I think that that's, you know, it's a, it would be a great way to push back and I think something that could really get um, you know, get people's attention and just, you know, I mean one way that one reason here's just circling back to the sales thing. It's very hard to tell like, you know what's happening with sales because royalties are, the statements are like six months to a year after, but there's some data that you can sort of look at, um like books can and other things. Um And I remember, uh one day like there's this like, like it was like a very specific like 100 copies sale and I was like, what is going on? This is a great thing. Like to do all of these ridiculous um like to respond to these places where people have challenged 100 and 30 books. They still, if the districts are doing what they're supposed to, they have to put the book through a review process and then they have, they have to buy a bunch of copies of the book to do the review. So this was this one place where they had like they had to purchase 100 copies of the book to do their review. And I do think it was actually reinstated in that case. So at least it was a happy ending that those, you know, taxpayer dollars purchasing my book ultimately put the book into reader's hands instead of like, you know, buying 100 copies and then banning it and like, you know, shoving them in some dark corner. What these book bans are doing is making school a toxic environment for the people who are serving our kids and right, Yeah. So that you know, having helping people understand, you might not be too worked up about what book is or isn't in the library but recognize that these people are, are undermining your kid's education. And secondly, the review like the challenge process when these in districts that haven't realized, we need to say you can challenge two books a year, you know, setting these limits. Um, and you know, the challenge process, the freedom of information requests that Moms for Liberty, like you know, it has um, is constantly issuing for information on what librarians are doing or whatever that means that the people who should be helping your kid right there research paper are having to comb through catalogs to flag everything that has a certain search term or they're having to copy, you know, print out their emails and copy them and do the stuff they're not able to do the job they're there to do because, and you know, and it costs lot of money to. So, so it's just sort of thinking about when, when anyone wants to make the the taxpayer argument is, like, let's talk about how much these frivolous challenges cost both in money and human resources and energy anyway. All right, you'll have one more question you want me to answer?

I want to close with with, sort of a lighter question, are you guys okay with? Sure. We're curious, as a writer, would you say you are more of a plotter or a panther? And at what point? Well, I'll let you finish that, and then I've got a follow up.

Okay, um I am not, I am not a plotter, I am a plopper I'm, I have a circumstance usually, like, it might be the explosion I have. Um you know, there's a there's a deadly gang fight in my second novel that really captured my imagination and the imagination of my summer school students. Like, I was like, okay, I'm gonna work with this, I'm a plopper in the sense that I have, I usually have a situation, and I usually have worked really hard to come to the sense of at least one character that I feel like belongs in the book, and I plopp the character into that situation, and then I try to figure out where the story is, and I do a lot of I mean, I do some, like, I don't know, I do what I I don't really think of it as plotting? I think of it as imaginary bets, like, I'm like, okay, what if this okay, well then this and this and this, but what about this? Um and so I tend to do that on a smaller scale, like um okay, if this is, like, you know, more as a way of trying to figure out what my characters will do or won't do or what kinds of things really do happen in this place and time. Um but I find the idea of actually plotting, like deciding in advance what's going to happen just crazy, because I'm like, well that means I'm I don't even know how you would do it. Like, I actually, I know this is why it's like this whole joke about writers because the plotters can't understand the answers or in my case the ploppers um and we can't get those, those lot people because I'm like that I can only ever see that as an imposition on the character in the story. Like, I just, like, I could not decide in advance and have it be right. I have intentions, I have ideas, but I always have a sense that this might be completely wrong and I might need to go in a different, completely different direction. So, you know, I mean, I might be making the plotters sound more rigid than they really are, but um but yeah, that's that's me, I'm a plopper.

That's great, that's a good answer. Ashley, you have been so generous with your time. Could you, could you please tell us and our listeners where they can find you if they want to learn more?

Oh sure. I have um see I have an instagram account @ashleyhopeperez. I have that same handle on Twitter, although I'm not super on social media and one of those like oh right, I have social media and I check it every once in a while people. Um I have a website Ashleyperez.com and what else? Oh you know what is more up to date is my linktree, which is also I think @ashleyhopeperez. Um but that's actually where I've been more actively like putting the new

interviews and stuff so that might be for people who want to see what's going on. The link tree account might be the most reliable but um I am yeah I'm going to just keep talking to anybody who wants to talk about books and readers and why it all matters and I really appreciate you all sharing your time and wonderful questions with me.

Thank you so much and your linktree was a very helpful resource. So thank you, thank you this has been such a pleasure, I'm so glad you could do this with us, so thank you so much. Thank you and thanks for being generous with your time as well. I appreciate you all. We appreciate you.

We loved talking with Ashley. We could have talked to her the entire night. We really appreciate that she was willing to spend so much time answering her questions. It was so generous of her to do that, and we will be sharing more of our thoughts about the interview and the book in our next episode.

So even though we did discuss the book in some detail, we're still going to go ahead and have our second episode because we have lots more to say. Yes.

So in the next episode we will discuss *Out of Darkness* in a close reading. Please join us next time as we discuss the novel's characters, themes, and significance. If you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit the [rogue librarians dot com](http://roguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians. If you're enjoying the podcast, by all means please subscribe. We love subscribers, which will guarantee that you will know when our next episode has dropped um and spread the word. Um we are available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcasts. And we would most love it, love you, if you would consider possibly supporting us as a patreon um on Patreon. Thank you to Chris for creating our music and to Lizzie, our savior for getting us online when nothing else works and for all the audio editing. We definitely could not have done this podcast without either of them. And finally, thank you to all of you for reading with us. You are the reason that we are here because books are meant to be read. Bye!

*Please excuse the typos and grammatical errors.