

5.4 The Meat and Bones of Life: Erika T. Wurth with Leif Sorensen (RE)

Transcript

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Welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Rebecca Evans, one of the hosts you'll be hearing from during this fifth season of the podcast. Novel Dialogue brings together critics and novelists to talk about how novels work and how we work in relation to novels, how we read, write, translate, and remember them.

Today, we're lucky to have Erika Wurth in conversation with Leif Sorensen. Erika Wurth's 2022 novel, *White Horse*, has garnered rave reviews. It's a *New York Times* editor's pick, a Good Morning America Buzz pick, and an Indie Next Target Book of the Month and Book of the Month pick. Now, beyond this marvelous novel, Erika is both a Kenyon and a Sewanee fellow. She's published in the Kenyon Review, BuzzFeed, and The Writer's Chronicle, and is a narrative artist for the Meow Wolf Denver installation. She is an urban Native of Apache, Chickasaw, and Cherokee descent. She's represented by Rebecca Friedman for books and Dana Spector for film. She lives in Denver with her partner, step-kids, and two incredibly fluffy dogs.

Today she'll be in conversation with Leif Sorensen, who is professor of English at Colorado State University. He is the author of *Multiethnic Modernism and the Making of U.S. Literary Multiculturalism* from 2016, and is currently completing a book on race and world building in speculative fiction. His most recent article appears in the *Routledge Handbook to North American Indigenous Modernisms*.

So welcome, Erika and Leif. Thank you both so much for being here today.

Erika Wurth

Thank you.

Leif Sorensen

Yeah, this is such a wonderful opportunity to talk to Erika about her work and I had the pleasure of being able to go to an in-person reading with Erika a couple of weeks ago, and was, of course, taking notes of, well, what else do I want to ask, and I'm just thrilled, and so I guess we'll start off with just thinking about the way that *White Horse* fits into your career, because it's, and you've talked about this in various places, that *White Horse* is a sort of shift in a career that's already seen you publish two books of poetry, two novels, and a linked collection of stories with a variety of independent and university presses.

And in your recent Crime Reads article, you mentioned that you are making a transition from dark realism to, and I'm going to quote you at yourself, but probably this won't be the last time, to your "childhood love of horror and speculative literature." And a similar sentiment seems to animate the dedication of *White Horse*, which is dedicated, and I'm just going to read this because I love it so much,

“To the nerds who fell in love with dragons and demons, with portals and alternate worlds, and who felt that in order to grow up, they had to put those things aside, and who came back.”

And so yeah, I just want to start off by asking you what it means to you to embrace speculative genres, which have historically been considered unserious and disreputable.

EW

Yeah, first, I want to say again, what an honor is to be here.

So how do I see myself, so how do I see myself like in the world of speculative literature is what you were asking? I'm so sorry.

LS

Yeah.

EW

Yeah, okay. You know, and right, and because it's been seen as not as serious in the past, I think, you know, as I've said in a number of interviews, I was a super nerdy kid, and I was picked on a lot, and I went to this sort of working class high school, and I was sort of working-class and middle-class in certain ways, my parents were very, came from very working-class roots, and then they kind of became, you know, middle class over time, but my dad blew our money. And so we had certain privileges. But otherwise, you know, I went to a very gritty school in Idaho Springs, Colorado.

And it was also like fairly diverse, like mainly working-class white people, but a smattering of Native people, Mexican, Indigenous, you know, North American, Indigenous. And I was just a super weirdo, and I was super internal for a variety of reasons. And so I just loved, you know, I think the easiest word is the escape of speculative literature, you know, spaceships and portals and ghosts, and that any kind of magic elves were cool to me. And I've said this a thousand times, but, you know, one of my dad's relatives tried to give me a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I just remember turning it over and over and wondering where the dragons were, just like, this is unacceptable.

But then I went to college and then PhD school and then became a creative writing professor because I thought, you know, oh, this is the most viable route for a writer. It's not. But they iron that out of you. They just sort of say, okay, literary means realism, or sometimes literary means postmodernism, right? But, and it certainly doesn't mean what was called genre. And over time, I kind of thought, you know, this doesn't make any sense. I would be like, okay, well, what do you mean by literary? And people would be like, “um, good.” Or more recently, they'd be like “experimental,” and I'm like, okay, but what's the experiment? Like, what is, what is it that you're doing that is different?

And I couldn't really get a good answer beyond, “I'm anti-narrative.” Why? Why are you anti-narrative? Why? What is wrong with narrative that you feel is conformist or unimaginative? So I couldn't get any good answers and I realized, you know, through my own thinking about this, that literary had nothing to do with whatever genre somebody was writing in. It could be drama, if you want to put it that way, it could, it didn't matter the aesthetic. Was it postmodern? Was it traditional? Was it all of the things, you know, that are in between in terms of plot and structure that we never talk about in literature? Was it about ghosts or demons?

I had realized there was so much that was in my work that was kind of dark and people would say, oh, this is so dark, you know. And yet I tried to be funny, to sort of offset it, because that's part of who I am as well.

LS

Yeah. Because I guess, you know, I'm used to hearing authors a lot of times sort of say, like, either the kind of answer that says, "oh, well, I don't, I don't really think about genre. I just tell the story that has to be told," or they'll say, like, "oh, well, you know, those categories, those are really, those are for marketers." And it feels like you have more of a sense of like, those categories are for marketers also certainly, but that there's a sense that there are things that horror lets you do that are really important to you as a writer.

EW

Yeah, yeah. I found that, and not to harp on this, but I find like I've given a couple of talks recently, and I find people to be hilariously offended by the idea that literary isn't just a word you can use that means good. And I will say, here are the histories and conventions of these genres, you know, speculative is a term that Robert Heinlein first used, I think it was in 1947. And here are the conventions, and then people get like, almost angry at the idea that somehow, like when you write there are conventions to it, and, and I'm like, okay, but why is this commercial or literary, and they're like, because! You know, they don't have any good answers, like I had somebody quite sarcastically say to me, oh, well, you know, should we tell our students just that they should all fall in love on page 50. And I'm like, no, but you can, you can imagine that there's a whole, the thing that we tell our students is there's a whole history of literature behind what you're writing. And you know what you can do, you can imagine like it's there and that you can utilize it.

So horror in particular, I find, you know, I think a number of Native American writers, a number of writers of any stripe, a lot of us have talked about how, you know, missing and murdered indigenous women issues, genocide, cultural genocide, I mean, there are forces not just outside of our communities, but within our communities that are so destructive. It is insane. I have watched things or been the victim of things that have truly astonished me. And I think that what happens is that horror is kind of a good way to talk about those things.

LS

It makes me want to think like, there's a way that we could go back and retrospectively read like Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* as Indigenous horror.

EW

A couple of people have suggested that someone said something about Erdrich in this regard, like magical realism, they love to use that when it comes to any BIPOC author who has, you know, either surrealism or just outright more speculative elements. And then when you go back to these BIPOC authors, the answer almost inevitably has to be like, oh, yes, I believe these things.

And I'm like, you know, I don't really have that answer, okay. You know, I don't need to be the most authentic Indian in the world and I'm not and I'm really not a part of that contest at all. But I can say that I like it when in my life, the ghost is a metaphor, but on the page, it's real.

LS

One of the other things that has really struck me about *White Horse* in particular, but your work more broadly also is how deeply these books have a sense of place that's really rooted in Denver, Idaho Springs, and like reading *White Horse*, I'm somebody who moved to Colorado in 2009 for the job. And, you know, so now I've been here for about 14 years and I feel like, wow, if I'd read this book, you know, even five years ago, I would be less able to be like, Oh, I really like, I really feel it on this kind of this visceral place-based level.

So I'm, you know, and Kari the main character. She grew up in Idaho Springs. She lives in a suburb of Aurora, like other people who can't afford Denver rents. She is a regular at the White Horse. She visits tons of Colorado institutions over the course of the novel. And I'm just curious if you could say more about like how you think of yourself as a writer of place and how you situate yourself in that regard in relationship to other contemporary fiction.

EW

Yeah, you know, I think that there are like grand traditions like Faulkner or, you know, *Winesburg, Ohio*, which is one of my favorites. There's just a ton of them like this. These are heavy influences on me.

But I think the other part of it is this is just, you know, I grew up right outside of Denver between Idaho Springs and Evergreen and all these places that I went, you know, they're kind of dying out. And the new novel kind of is like the new Denver, but this one really I wanted to do that I even set it in 2016 so that it could be just a little bit, you know, on that side.

But the other part of it is, in the United States, we're still like if you're non-Native and even Natives tend to be like, I'm so rezzy, I'm like, you're a third generation urban Indian. You are not rezzy and it's OK. Like we need to have a stronger sense of that there are historical interlocking urban Indian cultures. And in Canada, for example, you have these people that have a secondary status, the Métis. There's First Nations and then there's Métis. Here, you know, that doesn't exist. And it like allows people to exploit a very binary version of what Native American is. And it's not good for anybody. It is just not good. It's not good for us. It allows the bad actors in our world to exploit those things. It allows, you know, white folks, you know, or really folks from any stripe, if they have this deep need to fetishize Native Americans and without looking at our art as art to sort of say, okay, we just want to pick the most authentic Indian fetish object person and teach that guy as some sort of clear access to the Native American culture.

So for me, grounding it in Denver was personal. But it was also like, hey, you know what? Urban Indians have been in this town for a long, long time, long time, like Albuquerque, like Winnipeg, like, you know, Minneapolis.

LS

Absolutely. And that's something that really comes through, you know, in *White Horse*, but also, you know, going back to your earlier fiction as well. *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend* in the linked story collection, and *Buckskin Cocaine* are also in that Denver vortex.

The way that all of those books really are thinking about different varieties of urban Native experience really comes through in some such complicated ways. And I really like the way that you think that you were sort of talking about that as kind of a way of also rewriting Denver. And I'm curious if you think of

yourself as somebody who's, you know, kind of doing a revisionary approach to Colorado, Denver, the West, more broadly, as part of your project.

EW

That's such a great question. And, you know, I think it's funny because I have to admit, for years, I've been very annoyed by the idea that we are, that Native writers are always in the state of resistance, resistance. I'm like, we're just doing art. We're allowed to talk about who we are in a clean cut, clear way without being like, my job is to resist stereotypes. I'm like, my job is just to be who I am.

However, I had this conversation with Stephen Graham Jones at Tattered Cover the other day, which was an interesting situation. He's such a super, super neat guy. And we both love *Star Trek*, right? We're both like Trekkies, which people have no idea about him. And I think that's wonderful. In any case, he had said something about how this—it was on a podcast on the Talking Scared podcast, which is great. And I brought it up. I was like, you had said something about resistance as fun. And I was like, you know what? He's right because look, it's a factor in who we are. I do need to be like, right, like Colorado isn't this white space full of cowboys. There are actually lots of Indian and Mexican-Indian cowboys.

And, you know, or, you know, my cousin is a Black native, right? The narrative is not this this thing that people want it to be. And there's some fun that I think both of our characters have, his Jade and my Kari James, right? And kind of making fun people for their ideas and just sort of entertaining themselves.

And I'm like, you know what? That's kind of part of why Natives are funny, you know what I mean? Not to generalize not every single one of them. I've met some amazingly humorless Natives. But I think that's part of why, because there's an opportunity to riff on something that's so broad and so silly.

LS

That makes me think of just one of my like laugh out loud, like, remember this moment for the rest of my life bits of Kari's dialogue from the novel, which is there's a moment in her in her quest that takes her to that ultimate haunted site of Colorado, the Stanley Hotel. And as people are talking about whether or not the Stanley Hotel was built on Indian burial grounds, Kari can't stop herself from interrupting the haunted Stanley tour and says, it's all burial grounds.

There is this real pleasure that comes out of your novel in sending up some genre conventions and sort of accounts of place. And just that idea that, yeah, there is fun and resistance.

EW

I put it in 2016 so I could make Kari my age, but a little younger. Maybe there's some vanity there. But she is a Gen Xer and supposedly right, one of these things that is a marker is the constant sarcasm, which is also her strength and her weakness. But I wanted to give her that because it's yes, it's a thing you can't apply all the time to everything. But when she does, she gets some real zingers in there.

LS

I was thinking about like the *White Horse* as a ghost story. You know, and one of the primary hauntings is that Kari is haunted by the ghost of her mother, Cecilia, who disappeared when she was two days old. And as Kari learns more about the mother who she assumed had abandoned her, she experiences these

flashbacks from her mother's life. And this feels like another place where you get to add more, even more texture to the version of the Denver that you're presenting to us.

And I was especially taken by the moments when tapping into Cecilia's life allows you to connect the novel and Kari to the Red Power era, which, you know, again, for our listeners, is the period of Indigenous activism most associated with the American Indian movement and occupations of Alcatraz, the federal building and Wounded Knee. And I was wondering if you could just say more about what informed your decision to make that connection.

EW

On some level, it was a craft decision because you're right, I wanted to give some history and some depth, especially for Kari, who's like, I'm an Indian and that's where it ends. I know what tribes I am. I don't care. And she's not, like people kept being like she's self-hating. And I'm like, never. Kari is happy to be a Native person. She's just a cynical working-class person who's not interested in traditional spirituality at the outset, especially because it just seems hokey to her or silly or unnecessary. But she's not given a choice over time.

But I think that I'm not a political scientist. I didn't major in Native American studies. I'm a doctor of metaphors. So, but I wanted to make sure to like, you know, put in some of that history because going back to the whole urban Indian thing, I wanted to make that clear that those were very urban Native movements and they were on the rez, too. And those interlocking things are important.

Like, for example, in *There, There*, in Tommy Orange's *There, There*, there is like a real sense of even though his background and mine are so different. There's a real sense of like, this is what occurred here. And this is why it's important.

And actually, I want to say his might be the first urban Indian novel that doesn't harken back to the Res. And I think it's that's kind of important because what it does is it, there's something wonderful about writing about the reservation if you're from one or if your grandma's from one. There's also something so cool about not having to center it over and over again in order to be like, see how authentic I am, see how authentic I am. And there's something, so I wanted to make sure to put those in there.

But why it was craft based, too, was earlier, more realistic realism versions of the novel just had too many moments of things being repeated. Well, your mom, they're sitting in a room talking, right? And I know literary fiction people love description and dialogue. But in my opinion, that is one of the markers of why it's often boring. You know, I wanted to have a more fun, mystical moment where the main character is allowed to portal into her mother, if that's not weird, and see these things for herself so that the audience could see these things for themselves.

LS

I guess thinking also about, you know, the novel being set in 2016 and then coming out in 2023 and thinking about all the different kinds of collective action movements that are happening now and, you know, whether Indigenous-led movements like the Water Protectors or Idle No More. And then obviously, the Black Lives Matter is another movement, so many of which were, you know, doing lots of things in Denver right around the times the book was being written and coming out. I imagine that you

were thinking also about possible connections between the AIM era and our own, this current era of collective action movements.

EW

Yeah, you know, I think Black Lives Matter had a deep impact on Indigenous activism. It always has, you know, and I think there are two conversations that are had in this way that are relevant, which are, A: it's true that we have a different historical trajectory than African Americans in this country. And so that sometimes you can't just directly plop something on, but B: and yes, of course, you know, Indigenous people are often really invisible, but B: we sure do owe a lot of our political movements to them in every way. I mean, there is just no way around that.

And sometimes, you know, in our communities, Black Indigenous people aren't treated very well. And I think it all has to do with this constant conversation around who's an authentic Indian, like who's an authentic Indian. And there are, like I said, there are bad actors in our communities who are like, me and only me and let me tell you why. And I have spent 20 years pushing back on that because on every level, it's so important for us, regardless of whether we're just trying to get a pipeline not to go through a reservation because it is going to destroy the ecosystem. And it's not even sustainable.

Or if, in my case, in my little nerdy corner of the world, it deeply matters to me to have a variety of completely different Native voices publishing, yes, in stronger indies and in the Big Five, because those books have reach. And I love, like *Astrophil* is the small press that I've published with. And they took up my first novel, *Crazy Horse's Girlfriend*, and they're wonderful. But they would tell you, we simply don't have the reach or resources that the Big Five have. And I think this sort of knee-jerk reaction sometimes again, I hear in literary circles where it's like, they're all conformist and commercial. I'm like, I don't, I don't think so. I don't see that. I don't know why I gave that a grumpy old man voice, but I did. But it feels grumpy.

But I think that I have spent 20 years writing articles in *Buzzfeed*, writing articles in the *Writer's Chronicle*, making sure that this current wave, I guess you would call it the Fifth Wave, or maybe it's an extension of the Fourth Wave of Native American fiction, which is really where my specialty is, like, I know something about poetics, I know very little about nonfiction. There are still people today who are writing, they are far and few between, who do everything they can to hammer down the notion that, like, no, they're the only authentic Indian and you should just publish them. And I just, *ugh sound*, I just, I try to do the best that I can to just kind of ignore them because I like this. And I think that this has an effect on our entire reality.

So if you have a kid on the rez and they can be like, oh, here's this book about realities on the rez, here's this, you know, portal fantasy. Here's a science fiction book. It's good for our heads and it's good for everyone around us too, because they have a diverse, complicated sense of who we are. And I just think that matters so much. I mean, that's just what being human is. So I really, well, that's my little corner of the political world. And I used to be like, well, art isn't politics, but I think it has a trickle down effect that's important to me.

But I think what happened is a lot of these more like crime or, you know, sci-fi, it's a little bit more fun on the face of it. So you can see the commercial value. But it's really funny to me when literary people are like, you must get a million dollars for your ghostly book. And I'm like, I don't. And actually, who gets the

most money is not obviously your post-modernist generally, although there are exceptions, and certainly not crime or science fiction. It's actually either, sometimes your romance novel, although they more get just lots of contracts because they can kind of poop them out. And that's not a mean statement. Those are wonderful books in their own way. They're fun, but they have to to make a living. They have to kind of like, the demands of the audience.

But it's mainly book club fiction. Book club fiction are the people who get the six figure deals. They're the people who are on Oprah. They're the people who are the Reese's Picks. They're the people who the book clubs like. And they are 90 percent of the time quite realistic. And they generally have a spunky female protagonist.

LS

I'm going to use that as a transition, though, to one of the things that also strikes me about *White Horse* and how Kari moves through the novel is that everything from the impetus of her getting haunted by Cecilia is set into motion by her cousin Debby. Almost everything else important that happens in the book is linked to some kind of relation to another member of her either found or inherited family and usually women. And it seems like you're in your fiction at large families both found and biological are really fraught, but also vital sources of survival for characters. And I'm just wondering about like how you kind of negotiate between the shadow and light cast by the ties that bind families together.

EW

Well, I think to be fair to like realism or traditional literary fiction, when you take away the shinier things and you're left with a sort of meat and bones of life, you better be good. And one of the things, you know what I mean, but also like and I can see why then you have to really address these hard issues right on the face of them. And I think that family, there's a reason why that's one of the, probably relationships and then family secondarily, is one of the main things that fiction addresses, and certainly a lot of literary fiction addresses, because no matter what your situation is with your family, even if you've cut them all off and for good reason, you absolutely do not exist without them and you come from them. And you're, part of why you cut them off is you're terrified of being them and you don't want to be them. You see these things in yourself you don't want.

LS

Oh and that makes me think of a recent literary criticism book that's one of my favorite books in recent Indigenous studies, which is Daniel Heath Justice's, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. And you know, one of the things that he talks about in that book that really resonated with Kari and especially the way you were describing that Kari/Debby dynamic is that Indigenous literatures can teach us how to be good relatives. And I think that's what's so remarkable about this book is that it gets at this hard work of being human, of being in relation with people who you have to maintain a connection to because we don't survive without that network.

EW

Sometimes there are like, you know, Native American like touch phrases, if that makes any sense, that I find a little dusty. Just a lot of like, very like, our traditional ways are so pristine and perfect. I'm like, we

also have a bunch of predators in our communities. So there are times in which I'm like, I'm not sure how I feel about these things that get perpetuated to make us into perfect Indians.

But at the same time, I can't deny that if you look at traditional, and if we've been allowed to grow, maybe they'd be a little different. But if you look at traditional systems of relationship, yes, I do think they do show better ways because they're not meant to be tremendously hierarchical, but they're meant to be very respectful. And they are meant to be like, you know, you have a broader sense of who your relative is.

And I remember reading that the more and I don't like this word in this context, obviously, but the more "tribal" someone is, in other words, in a non-, I don't know how to put it, it's awful. But the more that somebody is able to see people who are not like them as their enemy, the more destructive they are, the more hateful they are, to be frank, the more conservative they tend to be. And so but the more people are able to see people who are not like them as relatives, the happier they are, the better their system is, the better their family system is, the better they are spiritually, the better they are.

And so I do think that's true, like even Kari's cynical, but she finally comes to a point where she's like, this is the thing I did wrong. I love this person. That was wrong and she takes accountability.

LS

Yeah. Yeah. And for me, like that was, you know, as much as there's the payoff of, you know, big scenes that I don't want to spoil for people, listeners who haven't read the book. But there's also that, you know, very touching for me, emotional journey that Kari makes of being able to have a little bit more space of her own fallibility and capacity for forgiveness for others, but also for herself.

And that feels like one of the big things with the friend who you mentioned is the crux of that argument with Debby or in their earlier lives. That's also the friend Jaime who Kari loses to an overdose. And I guess, yeah, just thinking about, you know, that was another kind of haunting in this book, not, you know, she never comes back as a spirit, fake non-spoiler alert, but that, you know, that guilt feels like it's something that Kari is just, you know, perhaps even more haunted by. And I just, yeah, was curious like how you were thinking about that.

EW

I think that, you know, she's technically the first ghost, but I let it really open. I think it's more like her mind is starting to open to change. And so the thing that she is truly haunted by emotionally is the first thing she almost feels that she sees. And that's how the mind starts to open that way. So that's why I did that. But yeah, in the end, I don't really think of her as quite the paranormal figure in the novel.

But yes, you know, in Idaho Springs, like I think a lot about the bullies we know as adults. If you are an adult bully, you're a monster. Okay, you're a monster. Like 90% of human beings are essentially good and they have terrible flaws and they come from where they're coming from and they can like, I don't know if I can say the F word, F it up really badly, but they can come back from it, you know.

But the rest of them really are just evil people. They are monsters. But when you're a kid, you're, when you're a bully, you're just responding to the environment around you. And the women that I grew up with, I was so freaking nerdy and weak. And then, you know, I'd be like, "you don't know me" but at the same time, they could just see that I was like, I'm shattered so easily. And in their way, they were kind of

trying to toughen me up. They were like, kid, you know, the world is not nice. And they were tough because they had come from poverty and/or sometimes incest, you know, worry, you know, on the back of their minds, it was like, I don't know what the future has in store for me. And this is why, you know, heavy metal is also a theme throughout because it has that kind of like, you have to be a genius to be good at heavy metal. But it's also, so you're like, OK, I am special, I'm going to get out. But at the same time, it's also just ragged and cruel and listening to it is sort of a salve in a certain way because it speaks to your existence.

But yeah, I wanted, I thought a lot about like, who you have to be in order to survive. And then, and especially like I said, in Idaho Springs and tough little towns like that or tough parts of the city. And then what happens is Kari finally realizes like, oh, I can still be myself authentically, but this is not, that I can't be in control of everything. Like I want to be. It scares me not to me, but I was not in control of my friend dying. I was not in control. She was an adult. She chose. And I think Kari just doesn't want to let go of that control and control is guilt and control is also responsibility.

RE

Thinking so much about this, like the pleasures of genre that have sort of floated in and out of this conversation throughout, right? And I keep thinking back to these kinds, like you said, right? That there's this almost a fear of plot, right? That was something you said early. And I know, which is, I mean, Lev Grossman talks about the genre turn, all this stuff about like genre as plot.

But I think that you're part of genre writers who show that you can, like doing plot really well also means doing character and relationship and setting really well. Those are not, like, which is the silliest, most obvious point. Like those things aren't in isolation, right.

EW

I think number one, I owe Lev Grossman. He, I, someone, some sort of ex of mine had said, you know, you kind of are getting back in a genre a little bit. You should read *The Magicians*. And it sat on my, like a trunk for a little while. And then I picked it up and it was just over for me. I was like, I'm done. Like I started reading like less and less what you call realism. And then I, now it's almost never, I just can't, I just can't go back.

And part of it is this snotty kind of like structured plot. You know, what, what is this? It's just as hard as characterization. The only thing that I can think like you can, and I've even seen people be like, I'm into lyrical, I'm into language. And I'm like, you know what, that you're aligning yourself with poetry because poetry was the first thing that was appreciated in terms of the written form as like in terms of our contemporary society as an art form. And so you're aligning yourself with that, but it doesn't mean that structure and plot are inferior, they're actually really hard.

And I want to be like, all right, you know, pull out, you know, *Save the Cat!* And if it's so easy, you do the beat sheet and you do it effectively. And if it's so easy, like sell it. And I bet you these people would be like—I've been like, you know, “an effective catalyst” and they're like, uh-huh. Like, you know, you can't just be like, here's my big idea in pretty words. You know what I mean? I just don't, I don't get that. I think there's a real pleasure in saying, okay, the catalyst isn't here normally, but in this structure that I've chosen, which is a little more complicated, like multiple point of view or spiral or whatever, I might put it

over here and I might make it a little different. So, you know, I don't know, I just, I'll never understand that.

LS

Yeah, it makes me think of, there was a podcast I listened to with Marlon James and Victor LaValle talking about sort of genre snobbery. And Marlon James said, you know, well, I think a lot of times it's just that these—you know, and it's that amazing Marlon James voice doing it. But yeah, they just can't plot. And then they try to make it into a virtue by saying they're lyrical or, you know.

EW

We all are taught that like Marlon had a very similar, I keep meaning to read his fantasy novel and Marlon's right. And he's always like, got this like very appropriate 'tude when it comes to everything. But he, all three of us have the same trajectory. Like we were taught in writing school that this didn't matter. And then I realized how much it mattered to me. And I just wanted nuts and bolts. I was like, just give me a craft book that says anything about structure. Instead of this like, I don't, it doesn't matter. It does, it does. There's a way to do it. And there are ways, there are multiple ways to do it.

LS

So yeah, well, and this is actually, I think, again, transitioning us to another question that I was interested in, is like, and this is really coming out partially from the fact that the last time I taught our Native American lit class, I actually had my students read your essay, "The Fourth Wave," when we were moving into a study of contemporary Native American poets.

And so I was, and I really love the way that you said that, you know, "The Fourth Wave has found its freedom, its fun, its big, beautiful, poetic license." And I was curious if you see similar development in Indigenous fiction of this sort of finding the fun, finding the poetic license or fictional license.

EW

Yeah, no, I wrote a companion piece, just called "The Fourth Wave" for the *Writer's Chronicle*. And it was really funny because somebody had seen the poetry one. And at, this was an interview I was at. And they were like, have you consider doing a fiction one, I'm like, yes. But what's really weird about it is I don't, even though I did the PhD technically in literature, but it was half creative, blah, blah, blah. I don't obviously think of myself as a critic, but this conception of these waves has, there are classes taught around these two articles. And I find that really funny because I'm like, you know, it just goes to show you, I love Native American critics, they're rare and they're smart and they're wonderful, but sometimes when they're like, "decolonize," I'm like, that is just a word to you because, you know, I find them oftentimes kind of like repeating what their peers say.

And I think because I've got this outsider status as a writer, I can look at things in terms of form and craft. And so that's what I did with the, with that essay and with the second one. And with the second one, what I looked at was the fact that like basically the big line, right, for Native American critics is like, our literature is different, but they don't, they're not trained to look at craft, they only look at content. And our content is actually fairly the same, even the roots. Like if you look at the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and you look at the *Popol Vuh*, which is like our version of that, it originated what we now know mainly as, in

Guatemala, they're actually very similar. There's a hero's journey, but it's prettily written in a different way because Native languages revolve around the verb and not the noun.

So it's like the sentences are more active in terms of metaphor automatically. And so there's that, but that's the thing is that, you know, the difference again is in the languages and the difference is our languages, it's not in the content, it's in the form. It's the fact that again, the languages revolve around verbs. And in fact, for years, Native American dissertations and Native American critics, they would constantly be like, we're an oral language people. I'm like, okay, let's look at 1492, shall we? Can we look at 1492 and ask how many people were literate in Europe and how many people were literate in the, in the quote, unquote, New World?

And I would, I would argue that there were just as many people literate. Like why are we not thinking about the Aztecs, the Mayan? And there are different forms of literature that might not be quite as complex or whatever, but these, they had libraries. They had road signs, you know, civilizations. They had these things that were markers of advancement, right? And these Native critics would be like oral, oral literature. And I'm like, this is madness.

And so I'm glad to see it's changing at least a little bit, not enough. I think those two essays really encapsulate, hey, let's look at these things in a more complicated, more concrete way. And I'm always, it's always, I guess the PhD was for something, so.

RE

And such a necessary reframing. As always, it should be we're talking about literary artists. Let's look at art. Let's look at craft, right? Like let's get away from these violent sociological, sociologically reductive readings, right? Like let's, let's get rid of that. And let's remember that we are talking about craft.

EW

Yeah. David Treuer's *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* really busted that door open and boy, did he make a lot of people really mad. And I was like, I love this book. So, yeah.

LS

And I guess, yeah, maybe thinking about that side of craft, like, are there, you know, particular writers that you see kind of as either mentors that have pointed you in directions that are important to you or as kind of, you know, co-conspirators, or partners in crime, as you're kind of creating a different version of, you know, both, these literary genre questions and questions about like what Indigenous literature is doing? 'Cause clearly you read broadly.

EW

Thank you for steering me back to that.

LS

No, no.

EW

Yeah, no, no, no, that's right. Because I was going to say that was the thing that I think is what I didn't realize in the fiction article was that I had seen more and more of this, you know, language driven postmodern stuff as the Fourth Wave. So if there's a Fifth Wave or if I was just wrong, I thought the next wave would be maybe more and more of that.

But no, it's actually turned out to be science fiction and fantasy and crime. And there are actually a couple of romance novelists. There's a girl named Danica Nava, she's a Chickasaw citizen. She's got an agent. She's gotten at least one offer. So her romance novel is going to be out.

And I think the, in the horror community, I have to admit, like there are people now, I love Stephen King, of course, and I love the classics, but Silvia Moreno-Garcia, I love, I mean, she's the one who could just write anything and I'd read it. I love Victor LaValle. I love Grady Hendrix. I think he is fabulous and very stylish. And just a nice guy. He's a nice guy and he's a wife guy. You know, I just kind of, he's just a cool dude. And then, you know, Stephen Graham Jones, it's just this wonderfully weird, kind of wonderful presence. And yeah, I think there's so much that's happening in Native American literature.

Like I said, V. Castro and, you know, my partner, David Heska Wanbli Weiden, there are just, Brandon Hobson, Kelly Jo Ford, Rebecca Roanhorse, B. L. Blanchard, Jessica Johns. I mean, this and I love this. This is what I wanted. I've been dreaming of this world for 20 years where like, it doesn't have to be the most authentic Indian in the world, the one guy. It's like all of us just sort of, you know, creating art together and like putting the pieces of the mosaic together. And, you know, this is going to sound really cheesy, but like, yes, it is my dream come true.

RE

On that note, so I think I might segue us to the very last question, which is a brief one. One of the perks of hosting this podcast is that hosts get to jump in at the end with the very last question of the episode. And each season of Novel Dialogue has one signature question that every novelist answers. And this season, our question is, Erika, other than your actual writing supplies and devices, what do you need to sit down and write?

EW

You know, I'm a kind of just, I don't have writer's blocks. Sometimes I have writer's depression. I have like, oh, I didn't get the agent. The agent wasn't able to sell it. Or, you know, there are just like I said bullies in the world and it just makes me sad and will depress me.

But I don't, like one good thing is like I always get back up no matter what. And I just start writing again. And it's, so I have a good, you know, compulsive need to write. So I don't really need anything, but you know what I really love? I really do love my office and my coffee and my dogs, although they bark, and I'm like, oh, you have to let you out again, you know, and just I, you know, there's no way around it. Sometimes you have to steal time so you only get five minutes. But if you can get a few hours to really dream and think about what you're doing, just having that time and having your, your own private office, god, it really is just a small thing, but I love that.

RE

Thank you so much. So I'll close by saying that we're grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, and to Public Books for its partnership. And we'd also like to acknowledge the support of Duke University.

Hannah Jorgensen is our website manager and transcript editor. Rebecca Otto is our social media manager and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Novelists from past seasons include Charles Yu, Ruth Ozeki, Jennifer Egan, Kelly Rich and many more. And we have more dialogues between novelists and scholars coming your way this season.

So from all of us at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate and review us on Apple, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.