

**Neil:**

Okay, I just hit record. Hi, Catherine.

**Catherine:**

Hi. How you doing?

**Neil:**

I'm doing great. This is a real treat because I read Scarborough like few, we, a few weeks ago, really. I mean, I read it a few weeks ago. I blibli, I read it in a, at a blistering pace. And my wife Leslie saw me reading it, you know, uh, it usually does, but very rarely does she see kind of, Hey, that looks interesting. And so she grabbed it from me, then she read through it and now she's given it to her mom. So I don't even have it in front of me cuz my mother-in-law has it, you know, at her house. But that the book is going viral in our family. It's an incredible feat. And for that to be your debut novel, I just wanna start by just saying to everybody listening, you gotta pick up and read Scarborough. It's a wonderful book. Congratulations on just such a wa uh, it's a, it's a great book. Could you tell us maybe a little bit about the book, uh, a little background for people that don't know it, and I know it's won of slew of awards and turn into a movie, but, you know, lots of people listening, aren't from Canada and lots of people listening aren't necessarily from North America. So what is Scarborough?

**Catherine:**

Oh, well, Scarborough is this, uh, part of Toronto, um, a suburb of Toronto. It used to actually not be part of Toronto until like I was like, uh, tween. And, uh, it definitely has that feel that it was once its own town. Um, and it's on the, you know, dodgier end of Toronto and the East End. And the reason why it's a little bit dodgy is because of its proximity to a nuclear power plant, the Pickering nuclear power plant where one river away from that. And because of the power plant, it meant that a lot of racialized folks and a lot of, uh, working class where folks could actually afford a home there either renting or buying. And that included my family. And so you have this very diverse community, uh, living there, and we really pride ourselves in community connection and also just resilience.

**Catherine:**

Just because, because again, being a racialized, uh, area where many of us have had to do really difficult choices just to survive, is that we really pride ourselves in the ways in which we have, uh, put food on the table, um, and a roof over our heads and, um, and, and, you know, really put people first before anything else. And it, it kind of shows in the way that the area looks. Uh, we really definitely are a, uh, an afterthought, uh, for, uh, politicians. So, uh, you'll see that our transit is really horrible and, you know, because of racism, because of classism, uh, we're seeing a a lot as like this very crime ridden, uh, dirty area, uh, where the butt of a lot of jokes

**Neil:**

Scarlem.

**Catherine:**

Yes, that's right, Scarlem

**Neil:**

Yeah. When I, when I was a kid, when I was a kid growing up in Oshawa, not too far from you, just, you know, half an hour east, uh, people call this Scarlem

**Catherine:**

That's right, that's right.

**Neil:**

Which is, which is a pejorative for both Scarborough and Harlem at the same time, taking down two cities at once.

**Catherine:**

Exactly. And, and so, uh, and, and, and it has, again, it has a lot to do with, uh, race and classism. So, um, I I, I grew up that way, like understanding that like, you know, good things were not for us. Um, that, that, uh, downtown was where it was at, that, uh, that's where pretty things were, um, where you are from. That's not it. It's, it's not attractive. It's, um, it's not desirable. And, um, and, and, and growing up, I, to be quite honest with you, I was always on my way out of Scarborough. I I had this, this fascination with being downtown when I was going to Ryerson Theater School and now called Metropolitan University. I would just daydream about the possibility of being this actor downtown li, you know, just reading a book on my stoop and, and watching like fancy downtown people walking by and walking their dogs, you know, <laugh>.

**Catherine:**

Like I had all these fantasies of living downtown. But then when I did live downtown, realizing that I actually didn't fit in, uh, I, I just, you know, people in the East End were a little bit more, uh, you know, social, uh, genuine, uh, people wanna talk more. They, they, they love just like sitting together and, and, and gossiping around about people. Um, finding like the, the simple, uh, the, the simple pleasures in life, like a, a bucket of, of fried chicken by the lake, you know, that, that kind of thing. And, um, not having access to a lot of cash, it's that we've had to be really creative about like how we spend time with one another. Um, so mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, being downtown and is, and, and feeling this like, like just like listening to people's conversations. And, and, and I, I, I felt that there was something missing in my life as, as an artist that there was something that wasn't speaking to me.

**Catherine:**

And then sadly, uh, because, um, uh, I was, uh, uh, my, my daughter and I were, we had to leave, uh, downtown, uh, because of, um, es escaping, um, uh, a, a very, uh, tricky situation, like an abusive situation. We, I, I ended up in Scarborough feeling like, like, you know, back at my parents' house feeling like I was back at square one and thinking, well, how did this happen? So that's when I opened up a home daycare. And during that time, that's when I realized that there was a story here that this was my home, first off, is that like, I was realizing like my, my shoulders were relaxing <laugh>, that I was around people that were my people. And, uh, I knew I was home. I was ready to be home and to build roots there. And, uh, I started the home daycare, uh, because at that time I was a single mom.

**Catherine:**

The only, the only way that I could afford living was to make sure that I wasn't spending money on daycare. So having a daycare meant that I didn't have to, uh, spend money on care for my child. And we, uh, lived hand to mouth, basically. But there was a story there that I knew that this entire community that we were pulling together to make ends meet, to be there for one another. And that, that, that there, there was a system that was not designed for us in the East end that we, it was a system that was really built to, it was designed to have us fail. And that I, that I, I was watching these frontline workers trying their best to serve their communities, um, with, with what they had, with what little they had. And I wanted to capture that story in, in, in Scarborough, the novel. So what ended up happening was I, I wrote a novel, uh, which follows the lives of three children, school-aged children in Scarborough, in, um, a particular neighborhood in Scarborough called Kingston Galloway. And, um, and it was, um, yeah, just, just following them over the course of a school year as they navigate things such as like, you know, abject poverty, uh, the, the, uh, special education system, uh, the shelter system and, uh, mental health and, and uh, uh, substance use. So, uh, uh, I just wanted it to be an ode to my community.

**Neil:**

You grew up in Scarborough. Were you born in Scarborough originally, or are you

**Catherine:**

No, I was born. Did you move there? I was born in, um, over at, uh, like in downtown, uh, Toronto. And Then, um, you know, like, uh, like a lot of folks that my parents could not afford, uh, living in Toronto were, they were in Brampton for a little bit. Um, so that's another, yeah, another city that I really love. I love Brampton, uh, really hard. Uh, and then at, uh, 10 years old, uh, we moved to Scarborough and I was there until basically, uh, February of this year. And now I'm, I'm living in Napanee.

**Neil:**

Napanee. You're right, which is a few hours away from Toronto. And I've heard you speak openly about how it's a cost of living decision, even though it's your home and you love it. You know, you can't afford to live in Scarborough today.

**Catherine:**

No, no. But you know what's went wonderful about Napanee. Is that we, you know, as, as folks, my partner and I, we wanted to be part of a community. We're not playing this real estate game where, you know, buy low sell high kind of situation. Um, we really wanted to grow old somewhere and have enough land to grow our own food and, um, be off grid. And we looked at Napanee, didn't really know the community very well, but it seemed, you know, nice people seemed nice. And the funny enough, I feel like this is the Scarborough of this area because it's, it's a rural community. It's, uh, like right now, like, you know, I'm on a really crappy internet signal, is that, you know, it's an afterthought, uh, for, uh, politicians, uh, because they don't care. They don't care about, um, in like internet equity for people who are farmers.

**Catherine:**

They, they don't care about farmer's, children and their need to have access to internet. Uh, and you know, like there's, there's so many things where people really do have to, uh, uh, access things themselves, be really creative about how, uh, they access resources because we are an afterthought. And so it feels like home now. Uh, like I realize now, like Napanee, like at first it was, it was a little bit jarring. Uh, there was a major like, uh, culture shock just because, uh, being, being brown in this, uh,

very white area, um, it, we, we really had to get to know people. They had to get to know us. And we realized we were really meeting in the middle because they needed to know that we were not city slickers coming in and doing the gentrification game. We were committed to being here, being part of the community, getting to know our neighbors, and also they needed to see that we were hardworking, which we are.

**Catherine:**

And they see us all the time working our land. Um, and, uh, you know, cuz we're in the middle of, you know, a several year project of creating like a permaculture farm. And, uh, they're seeing that, that we're hardworking people. It means felling trees, it means collecting water, um, dealing with waste in a way that's responsible. And that them seeing that and knowing that, uh, we're committed to the community, it, it really has softened people around us. And that's really great. And also a lot of people who are from the queer community in Napanee, uh, um, I've received a lot of messages, uh, people who have actually had to escape Napanee, uh, for being queer messaging me saying, if I had only seen your picture in the paper when I was a kid, cuz I, you know, I had my picture in the paper, um, uh, the, the Napanee Beaver here, uh, uh, this person said like, that would've changed my life if I had seen someone like you in the community. I wouldn't have had to leave. And so we, we understand that, uh, we're risking a lot of our safety being open here, but we just know that again, we're doing it for, we're doing it for the future. We're doing it for the, uh, like, you know, so that there is another generation of queer folks that will feel safer, um, years from now living in this community. And they deserve to live in this community.

**Neil:**

Wow. Oh my gosh. That is, it's, I'm inspired list to you, <laugh>. I mean, uh, you've opened up so many, you've opened up so many themes already. I mean, I'm writing down the words as fast as I can. You can say Permaculture Farms. Systems designed to have us fail, uh, power plant, racialized communities, being brown, queer, gender non-conforming. You've also, uh, been open in a lot of media identifying as Filipino, Chinese, Spanish, and Indian. Which is just an incredible mix. Um, right. And so I wanna just take us back to Scarborough for a sec. You're moving from downtown there at age 10. Um, you know, we, we, we know we've been really open about the fact this is a community that, you know, has a very high rate of, of poverty, uh, you know, very high rates of multiculturalism, uh, lots of, and even the book itself, your book is categorized online as Bipoc Asian Literature, L B G T Q, literature, lesbian Literature, youth Culture.

**Neil:**

Right. So the, all these labels get attached to it, but then at some point, I think a year or two later, you come across a book called Obasan, O B A S A N, written by Joy Ka Kagawa, K o g A W A. She was originally born Joy Nazomi Nakayama. This book is written in 1981, published by Anchor Books. The covers a large train window of a young Japanese girl staring out of the train, almost like a sad melancholic face with the title on top in sort of a, I hesitate to say like an Asian tinged font. I mean, that probably sounds terrible. It's like one of those,

**Catherine:**

No, no, ust name it, it is the, the takeout font <laugh> a lot of this, this

**Neil:**

It's the Chinese takeout font

**Catherine:**

Takeout takeout, uh, Chinese food font that we all know. Yep, yep.

**Neil:**

<laugh>. Exactly. So, Joy Kagawa was born 1935, a Vancouver, Canada. She's 87 years old today in 1941 following Pearl Harbor she and her family were forced into a Japanese internment camp in Canada until the end of World War ii. Most of our listeners will not be familiar with this, but Canada infamously created Japanese internment camps throughout World War II to force the Japanese Canadian community, um, taking a lot of their land, taking a lot of their boats into specialized camps, really fear-based decisions as Canada went to war, um, with the quote unquote allies against, against Japan and Germany, et cetera. Joy Kagawa went on to work for the Prime Minister's office in Ottawa in the 1970s until beginning to write her own novels. This book is based on the author's own experiences and it's award-winning novel telling, telling the story of the evacuation, relocation, and dispersal of Canadian citizens of Japanese ancestry during the Second World War. It is told from a young child's perspective, and like your book, Scarborough, often required reading in Canadian literature courses, file this book, Dewey Decimal Heads under 8 1 3.54 for 20th Century fiction. If we can take you back to Scarborough for a second. Catherine, can you tell us about your relationship with Obasan by Joy Kagawa?

**Catherine:**

Well, when I first moved to Scarborough, I need you to imagine that at that time that was cottage country for Toronto. Uh, like, it, it was like on the East End, a lot of people had like the cute little cottages.

**Neil:**

Can you give us a rough time, like 19, 1980s?

**Catherine:**

Yeah. In the 1980s. And it was, it was, um, we were really surrounded by white folks and we were the first brown folks on our street. Uh, so, and we, it was, um, so lonely. Like I remember that time, like not really seeing anybody that looked like me. And I remember a woman knocking on the door, my, my dad and my mom weren't home, and I opened up the door and she was like, is your, are your parents home? And I said, no. And she said, well, I need them to sign this. And she showed me like a, like a, a, um, a petition and gave me a poster to keep for my parents to read. She said, what? Um, tell me, let me know when they're back because I'd love for them to, to sign this petition because we're against this. It was like this, this low income housing building that was going to be built at the end of Beach Grove, which was our street back in the eighties.

**Catherine:**

And, um mm-hmm. <affirmative>, I wasn't quite un I was, didn't understand what was going on. And, and she said, you know, cuz we, if they build that building, they're gonna be those people coming. And I remember thinking, oh, that's us. She means us. We're those people <laugh>. And I, I, you know, like when you realize you're like, oh, you're enemy number one. Okay, cool. I mean, which, what's funny now is that Beach Grove is now home to a majority of Bipoc folks in Scarborough. Um, and, uh, I, it it's a, it's a beautiful community. It's, it's transformed to like a, a, a very inclusive community. Uh, I love

walking that street all the time, but, uh, it's, it is, it just makes me laugh that back then it was a very different makeup. So imagine that I'm, you know, we're required to read a book. And at that time it was mostly, you know, you know, Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, like mostly, uh, or like, you know, books, Canadian books that are, uh, standard reading for students, which, uh, mostly are about like, uh, growing up, you know, cottage life, um, like my parents are getting divorced, uh, that, you know, like that kind of, uh, subject matter.

**Neil:**

I had, I got the same ones, uh, I got the same Alias Grace by, you know, uh, Margaret Lawrence, uh, Stone Angel, those types of books. Right. Yeah. Maybe, maybe you also were given Great Gatsby or Lord of the Flies or other books like sewn in there. Not always, not always Canadian, but yeah, for sure. Like, it was, they were not, it wasn't a diverse set of books at the time. It was the classic, you know, book A Separate Peace. Right. A classic. The classic kind of literature that you'd been given throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties.

**Catherine:**

Oh Yeah. Right. No, absolutely.

**Neil:**

So where did Obasan come from?

**Catherine:**

Well, then it, you know, you're, we're handed this book where it's a Japanese author, not only that, a Japanese woman, and I was, I was mm-hmm. <affirmative> floored thinking, wait a minute, I, someone like me can write a book and it, it, it just really got my wheels turning, like thinking like, wait a minute. Like, uh, somebody, somebody who looks like me has a voice, has a story, and can share their story, and people are actually gonna buy the book. Like, uh, it, it just, I, I didn't even understand it. Like, I, I didn't even understand like that, that it could be possible. And, uh, I, I swallowed that book whole, like, just read it through. And I c I even though it wasn't my community, like, you know, we, the Japanese community is vastly different from the Filipino community. Like there are all these nuances in, in every community.

**Catherine:**

And, um, but it was the closest thing I could get, you know, like at that time, the, the closest thing I could get mm-hmm. <affirmative> to any racialized material, uh, any racialized media was The Cosby Show. <laugh>. Like, that was it, that was the closest thing I could do. Or, or like, or like that, um, yeah, there was that, uh, one, um, uh, I think it was Young MC uh, Bust a Move. I remember there was a, a Filipino right in that music video. And just the joy in seeing someone from our community in that music video, like that was enough. That was all we had. The, you know, that was, it was that Filipino who we do not know in that music video. We don't know what her name is. And then the, uh, and then Joy Kagawa and, and I was, I was just amazed.

**Catherine:**

I was, I was so pleased. And so imagine, you know, flash forward, um, decades later is that, you know, with being an author being asked to attend the Writers Trust Gala, uh, they have authors at every table and at that table, uh, Joy Kagawa is sitting right next to me. And I, I knew she was being surrounded by

people like just ev people everywhere were y you know, fawning over her. And, and you could see that, you know, she's, she's very much like me, like really does not like crowds, doesn't like, you know, doing this the social thing that you should, you have to do as an author. Um, cuz it can get really overwhelming. Uh, and I just, you know, kept, kept my distance to make sure that I wasn't going to, uh, bother her. And people were just trying to take selfies and everything.

**Catherine:**

And we sat next to each other and we got along like a house on fire, so much so that we ended up, you know, having meals together, um, after. And, uh, we're still in touch. I, I really think of her as someone that I respect. I definitely most, I most definitely respect her privacy. And I think that that's the main thing is that we, we, again, we both value that, uh, like quiet <laugh>, we both value quiet. Um, but she, it, it never escapes me that she's the person that really taught me that being an author is possible. And, uh, I I'm, I'm so thrilled. I'm so thrilled to know her and, um, uh, and, and, and, and just even to have been in a presence, if it had just stopped at the, at that gala, you know, just sitting next to her, I would've just been very happy. But, um, having gotten to know her over the last while, it's, it's, it's been, it's been really great. It's been wonderful. And, and it just goes to show you, like, you know, to anybody listening is that it, uh, take it seriously like that since those sensations in your body when you feel like there's this door that has opened in your heart, it's a don't ignore it. Like, really just walk through the door and, and see what happens. And, uh, wonderful things are are out there just waiting for you.

**Neil:**

So you felt those, those reverberations in your body at age 12 when you were handed Obasan as a, as an assigned book in school, and it was, you know, an author of color and it was a woman and it was talking about an immigrant experience. And then how did you walk through the door? Because, you know, you are an award-winning writer today, a few decades later. How did you lean in to, to your writing at, at, at after that point?

**Catherine:**

Well, you know, like a lot of artists, it's taken a moment for me to figure out where my place is. And as a brown woman, you're often put in this position where you're, you're told that there's a standard to which you must meet, which is, you know, a white able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender kind of ideal that is not you. Y and you have to sort of meet that ideal somehow. You have to jump through, uh, you have to jump through hoops, you have to walk on fi uh, you know, like walk through fire like that, that kind of thing. Like, that's, that's what you feel like as an artist. So I remember, you know, in my early days, like, you know, I, I've been telling stories since I was a little kid. Like, I remember feeling like if there was a story inside of me, it was like breathing, like I needed to put it down on paper.

**Catherine:**

And I still have like, scribbles and stuff of, of things like, just like, just random writings because there, there were things being told to me that I needed to put down. And when I say that, it's because I always believe that my ancestors are speaking through me and I'm just putting down what they're telling me to say. And, uh, uh, I remember, you know, like as, uh, I, I remember thinking that, you know, to put food on the table, I'm gonna be a magazine writer, and I was the associate editor of a, uh, beauty industry magazine. I was a columnist for,

**Neil:**

This is after, this is after you went to Ryerson?

**Catherine:**

Yes. I went to

**Neil:**

You went to Ryerson for theater?

**Catherine:**

Yes. I went to Ryerson for Theatre / Acting.

**Neil:**

So you

**Catherine:**

Yeah. Uhhuh <affirmative>. Yeah. And so, uh,

**Neil:**

So you, and you kept and you stayed living in Scarborough at the time?

**Catherine:**

At this time? Uh, I, yeah, I was, I was back and forth between, uh, downtown and Scarborough and Okay.

**Neil:**

Okay. So you, uh, sorry, I I'm not trying to, um, so you, you, you get exposed to this book, expose you to the potential and like every artist myself today, yourself, today, everybody mm-hmm. <affirmative>, a lot of people listening today, Hey, we're always searching for purchase. We're struggling to figure out where we fit and how we fit in. You, you, you always had the inclination to kind of write stories. You go, you go to school for theater, and then you start to work at a mag at, at a, at a magazine to put food on the table, right? And to keep and to keep the writing chops going. I'm assuming.

**Catherine:**

Yes. I mean, like, it, it was, I think that I like a lot of kids of, of immigrant parents is that you have this, you know, that this creative part of you, but that you have to sort of quiet down because there is this expectation that you're going to make su to, to create a stable household for your family. And so there's a part of you that still has to seek out something stable. And so after theater school, I was doing everything from temping to, uh, uh, yeah, and then to getting into magazine writing, uh, because I knew that I had a good voice and that I knew I was a good writer. But I knew that with being in the, in an editorial team, that that was going to be a regular paycheck that I could count on. And it wasn't. And it was funny because I would also send out, you know, I would, I work as a freelancer as well and send out articles to magazines to see if they would accept them, and rightfully so they would reject them because it didn't matter to me.

**Catherine:**



You know, like talking about the newest lipsticks, talking about, um, how to buy high-end art or, um, what are, what are the other things that I, I was writing about, like, just like, you know, just mundane things. Uh, it, it wasn't my voice. It wasn't something that actually mattered to me. And, uh, you know, with like, uh, an example that I always give as is that for Flair Magazine for example, I would always get rejected because the ideas that I came up with about, you know, fashion and, uh, you know, like, like certain fashion trends and all that, I had no business writing about that. I, um, of, uh, of course I, I was witty and everything, but it really, uh, the entire business of trying to match the voice of a magazine is really tricky. And it, it, it was real, it was diluting my own voice.

**Catherine:**

And I remember giving that up. And some, you know, many years later, Buddies in Bad Times Theater asked me, could you write for our blog? Because what we're trying to do is we want a blog that just you write about something that you, you know, you just wanna write about anything that you wanna say. Just because we're trying to direct more traffic to our website. And I, I could have believed that there was this opportunity, it was for nothing. It was like for \$150 every article. Uh, and it was only once a month that was happening. But the fact that I was being paid to just write whatever I wanted, that was I think, a major turning point because then I was tuning into my True Voice, which is unapologetic, which is, it's funny, uh, it's daring and bold. And I started writing about, um, things such as, uh, you know, how, how to like, uh, one of the most, most, uh, read articles that I wrote for Buddies in Bad Times was, uh, what it was like to pose nude for now magazine's shoot.

**Catherine:**

Because, you know, uh, with Now Magazine, they used to, uh, before the pandemic have a, um, a body positivity January issue. And, uh, it was like this year, it was an annual event where about like five Torontonians were photographed in the nude, and then they were interviewed about what they, what their relationships were with their body. And instead of leaving it there and letting Now Magazine just do their article, which was so wonderful to be able to express that I al I also wanted to talk about what it was like to be a former anorexic <laugh> to be posing nude for the Now Magazine shoot. And that was one of the most, uh, widely read articles that I've ever written. Um, and it became viral with my photo of me nude. And there was something about that that just unlocked everything for me, where realizing that people wanted to hear from me an unapologetic Asian feminine queer, talking about their experiences, um, and, uh, you know, my experiences with my body, with, uh, parenting, with, uh, being a partner, being an artist in this world. And then from then on, it became this thing where if I just really just said what is was exactly in my heart, instead of trying to meet a magazine's mandate, then, then it was like everything that I created was finally it was mine. And I had, uh, I had had agency over what my story was. And from there, you know, writing Scarborough publishing Scarborough, uh, you know, and, and then now I, I feel like that voice inside of me, that constant, uh, the, the honoring of that voice inside of me is always there.

**Neil:**

Wow. Well, I have to ask, what was it like posing nude for now, for Now Magazine?

**Catherine:**

<laugh>

**Neil:**

I, I need to, I, I, I haven't read the blog post, but tell, tell me what it's like going into a magazine shoot and, and posing nude for a magazine.

**Catherine:**

Well, you know, like, I could lie to you

**Neil:**

As a former anorexic, as you say,

**Catherine:**

Yeah. I could lie to you and tell you, oh, it was so empowering, and oh, it was like, it was, it was so wonderful. And like, you know, fi you know, when I stripped off my clothes, like, you know, I, I felt like a woman and blah blah. But the truth was, is that leading up to the shoot, I kept on thinking to myself, why am I doing this? Why? And everyone's gonna see my bits. They're gonna see, like, uh, I, I haven't lo you know, I'm, I, um,

**Neil:**

So for people that don't know this, like I don't, you're talking, it's a, it's, it's a nude shoot. Yes. It's not like the Sports Illustrated body issue where you don't see their bits, you know? No, you're, this is like a real full frontal type of stuff.

**Catherine:**

Absolutely. And the idea is it's about positivity, right? It's a, and and it's, it's, uh, right. Uh, you know, of course if, if it's titillates someone great, but the, you know, like the idea of the issue is to show people, like, you know, for example, the, the cover of Now magazine at that time was a person, uh, breastfeeding their child and, uh, right. And nude, and which was so powerful. And, um, I, I remember doing the photos, uh, like, and, you know, being nude isn't something that necessarily irks me just because, you know, being an artist, like, who cares? Like, it's just, it's just my body. It's just the fact that I was being photographed and the voice in my head. Uh, you know, this former anorexic voice in my head saying, oh, but you didn't lose weight in preparation for this shoot.

**Catherine:**

You ate dinner before this shoot. And why did you do that? Like, I, I remember thinking that in my head before the photographer, Tanya Tisiana was photographing me, and I, I, I was realizing I was really clocking it in my head, and instead of really, uh, bowing to those urges of starving myself before a shoot, uh, sucking in my belly, all of these things, I was just really mindful of it and saying, no, I'm gonna move forward. I'm gonna actually eat my dinner. I'm gonna go in, I'm gonna have actually like a full belly, and I'm gonna relax in front of the, the camera. And then there was another thing where I was photographed, and when I work with a photographer, I always think that we are in partnership to make this photo. So I look, I look at the playback, I look at like what those, those shots are looking like, and the first few shots, if I tried to hide my body, which, you know, you see a lot of nude photos do, like, you know, sort of cupping the breasts or, or crossing the legs so that you can't see someone's crotch or whatever the weirder the image looked.

**Catherine:**

And so what I did was I put on a, a set of heels and instead posed in a way that was like, look at my body. And there was something about it that mm-hmm. <affirmative>, then there was this change in the way those photos were that I felt confident, I was proud of myself, and I was happy to be there. I was very present in my, in my, in my skin. And then there was like, you know, another part of it, which is when it, when it gets published, is that then you have all these people who have, uh, opinions about your body, uh, which are really, really interesting. Like, you know, people making, uh, comments about like, uh, how little or how much hair I had in my body, uh, what the shape was of my body, uh, complaining about the fact that, um, why, why weren't there more skinny people in Now Magazine?

**Catherine:**

Um, and just like <laugh>, just like all these things, right? And realizing how, uh, it didn't matter. It didn't matter what people said. And it doesn't matter that forever and ever, people are gonna be able to see this on the internet. Uh, because the, the reason why I wanted to write this follow up article in Bodies and Bad Times is for people to understand that, uh, the, I posed for that specifically for people who had bodies that looked like mine so that they could feel beautiful so that they can, uh, they, they can, they too could feel present in their bodies. And it, it wasn't a stunt, it was for me to be present. And so since then, it really was this life changing moment where, um, I, I really do feel very happy to be me.

**Neil:**

Oh my gosh, what a beautiful, what a beautiful story. And I'm so, so grateful for you to, for you for doing that and for sharing it. I, I do think there's so much that we have to do, we as people in general, when it comes to being comfortable with our own bodies, and I think about, you know, um, things like doing, you know, people listening could do something like that with a, with a partner or a lover, um, you know, uh, or go to a nude beach or go somewhere where you are put in a situation, it feels uncomfortable, but through it you grow more comfortable with yourself. And I'd be lying if I, if I said I, I, um, didn't need some work <laugh> in that regard. I'm sure a lot of people, yes, I'm sure a lot of people can listen because, because you know, whatever your body looks like to you in the mirror, when you see yourself naked all the time, it never looks like what, what you see in, on Instagram or in the movies even still today.

**Neil:**

Even though we have such a, a much more accepting culture of what bodies look like. And we have wonderful children's books like, I don't know if you know the book Bodies Are Cool by Tyler Feder, F e d e r, so wonderful children's book. We read it to our kids. And the drawings in that book are just so illustrative of what you actually see on the bus or on the street. They're not, you know, they're not kind of, uh, all, all sort of pretty people. And it makes you more comfortable and in fact, even tilts the conversation the other way, which is not just to be comfortable with your body, but to be so excited and delighted and, and proud of which parts of your body have less hair or more hair, or which part of your body looks skinny or fat or whatever.

**Neil:**

These are actually the things, you know, that make bodies interesting and special and You know, Leslie and I just had a vulnerable conversation in chapter 109 of this, of this podcast with Rebecca, the, the sex educator. And we've debated cutting it out, but she kind of, you know, I, I always, um, compliment her armpits. It's like a funny thing in our relationship, <laugh>, but it's not funny. It's, it's loving because it's, it's an area of herself that she's sensitive about. Right. And so, you know, this is all in service. You're, you

sharing this story and you're sharing that, that you wrote that blog post. I mean, this is an outpouring of reading this book that helps you kind of see yourself, you know, as a young child and another identity. But it's just a journey that we're all on. And what other, you know, steps can we take to be more accepting of ourselves? Not all of us will have the opportunity or will take the opportunity to pose nude for a magazine, but there are other things we can do to be more comfortable with ourselves that I'm sure we're not doing today that we could be.

**Catherine:**

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that for, for me, it's one thing I'm really thankful for is that I have definitely used looking at myself as a tool, and I know that a lot of people who have body shame, that there's some people who have actually never looked at their body in the mirror naked, uh, because they're, they're just so ashamed of their bodies that, um, I, I'm, I'm, I feel thankful that I have, I now feel comfortable looking in the mirror. And, um, and there's, there's steps that they're, you obviously, it's, it's not gonna be like all at once, but just like, like right now, for example, as progressive as I am with my body, love is that I am getting used to the idea of not sucking in my bo my stomach at all. Mm. Because,

**Neil:**

Which I totally do every time I'm in, every time I look in the mirror, I do that. I, I push my chest up and I push my stomach. I want it to look as good as it can, right?

**Catherine:**

Yes. Well, like, if you think about,

**Neil:**

But I don't need to be doing that

**Catherine:**

the political thing. If, if you step back, right? And go, why do I do that? And then you say, like, you, you can say like, even, like even farther back, not just you. Why do people do that? And, um, for someone who's feminine is that feminine people, if we're small, if we're, if we're skinny, if we're weaker, then it makes us controllable. And so how can I not be controllable? How can I just flip the finger to a system that says that, that's trying to shut my body down in this way? And so one of them is that

**Neil:**

Why, why did you say it makes,

**Catherine:**

Oh, what that makes me controllable as in like,

**Neil:**

Just not to pause you. Yeah, sure, sure. Yeah, why?

**Catherine:**

Why, like, okay, so if I'm focusing on being skinny, if I am focusing on being small, it makes me submissive. It makes me not focus on more important things like equal access to resources. Like where I

stand in this world, how I am being treated in a relationship. Uh, it, it keeps me occupied with things that don't matter. And, uh,

**Neil:**

So you feel that when we suck in our stomachs in the mirror, it's kind of a vestigial tale of, uh, the old idea that we always need to conform?

**Catherine:**

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Right. And then think about like how empowering it is now. You know, like I live on, on, in, on this, this 3.7 acre lot that is completely overrun by trees where having to fell trees on a regular basis, deal with compost, uh, collecting water and all this to take, uh, you know, moving rocks back and forth and all this stuff. It takes a lot of power in my body and how empowering that is to see my body getting larger because I'm moving things. I am staying healthy because I am doing things with my body that I didn't even know was possible. Uh, you know, like, uh, like a wheelbarrows full of gravel, which I could never have picked up like six months ago. I could never have picked it up. And now I'm, I'm wheeling it, you know, an acre away to create a drainage in our backyard.

**Catherine:**

And, uh, my body is big. It is, it needs sustenance. So I feed it so that it feels good, and that kind of awareness around that, like, I could not have that kind of awareness if my, my focus is on being skinny, being acceptable and being beautiful. Instead, I'm thinking, how do I feel about myself? How do I make sure that my back is healthy so I can do all of these things so that, you know, as things get scarier and scarier that we have food to grow, um, how do I make sure that I am, uh, in this world and being present for this world so that, um, I can run, I can pick things up, I can, I can, um, move things. Uh, I can build things. My my brain is working really well because like, you know, I have to think about like, like really creative solutions to problems, uh, such as, um, uh, you know, waste, you know, things like that. You know, <laugh>, I, I, my body is doing incredible things on this land, and that's because I'm not focused on weight loss.

**Neil:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, this is beautiful. Also, it makes me think of the Blue Zone study. You know, Dan Buettner and a team of, uh, researchers from National Geographic went and studied the seven parts of the world where people live over a hundred in a higher ratio than anywhere else in the world. And one thing they, they found is that they had kind of natural physical resistance in, you know, they had to walk up a big hill to get their water every day, or they had natural, um, you know, there was natural physical exertion as opposed to the kind of physical exertion I typically have, which is, you know, going to my basement and lifting weights for a few minutes. Right? Yeah. Like, that's what I'm kind of creating it, it's a, going to the gym is a, is a false representative of real physical exertion, right?

**Neil:**

I mean, I, I'm doing it in a, you know, 25 minute workout, you know, following an app on my phone. Well, that's not the same as carrying water from the well, right? And so it's really nice to reposition or kind of give yourself a mental chiropractic adjustment to say, what's my body for? And I like that. You also, when you keep saying, my body, what I'm hearing is you're not your body. Like you, your body is, is this clothing that we get to wear that mm-hmm. <affirmative>, uh, serves us if we serve it. And you, you talk about sustenance, you talk about, you know, making sure it's, it's challenged and, and it's a healthy

way to live. Before we move on to your second book, is there anything else in this period of your life, I'm hearing former anorexic, you know, going downtown, entering theater school, being opening her eyes to the idea of seeing herself in media, then it, it, it even, you know, it spurs you to be posing nude and to, to kind of go on this incredible journey. You're way ahead of a lot of people, myself included on body acceptance. Now are is, can we go from, could you take us from this time of your life to the time of your life where I can introduce your second book? You don't fast forward through your biography too fast?

**Catherine:**

No, no, it's fine. I mean, like, uh, around, uh, you know, I, uh, at this time I was, uh, uh, I, you know, thinking about like, you know, going back to where I was writing for, you know, publications where it wasn't really my voice, like one of them, it was a regular gig writing for a blog. Uh, if you can imagine back, you know, in the early two thousands when, when blogs actually could make money and stuff like that, like this, um, was a blog that actually had a, a staff of people. And I was one of them, uh, working from home. I was a, um, at that time I had a small child and, uh, it was just a gig where part of it was reviewing children's items and encouraging people to buy those items. And then another one was, uh, for this company was reviewing books and

**Neil:**

This, so you became, you're working as a blogger and you're a mother now.

**Catherine:**

Yes. So I've got a small child. I'm like, and, and really, you know, reviewing it means like, every now and then there would be a book in the mail and to provide my thoughts about it. And, uh, I didn't know much about books. I, I, you know, I had, I've written plays, uh, but I had never written, written a book at that time. And, uh, in the mail comes, uh, Heather O'Neill's Lullabies for Little Criminals, and ah,

**Neil:**

Ah here we go.

**Catherine**

Yes.

**Neil**

May, may I introduce it for people?

**Catherine:**

Sure, yes, please.

**Neil:**

Okay. Okay. I, I'm just, I'm just gonna do this. I, sorry to interject, but I want to, I wanna always wanna have people feel like they're doing right, you know, holding it in a bookstore, or I'm holding this book in my hands. It's a pink soft cover with a very striking cover with a bright, bright kind of fuchsia pink with a clip arty photo of like a 1950s schoolgirl, kind of skip in mids, skip skipping with kind of ankle length green socks, uh, black buckled shoes, uh, a blue skirt and a little, uh, ribbon on the top of a, of a black, of

a black blouse. It says, an all little lowercase lullabies for little criminals. A novel by Heather O'Neill underneath. It's, I'm, I'm reading the 10th anniversary edition, which tells you that was popular for 10 years that they printed it. Again, it's the Scotia Bank, Gill Prize short-listed author of Daydreams of Angels, and the Girl who was Saturday Night, Heather O'Neill was born in 1973 in Montreal.

**Neil:**

She's a Canadian novelist, poet, short story writer, screenwriter and journalist. What's this book about? Well, 12 year old Baby, and that's the name of the, of the protagonist. Baby is motherless and lives with her father Jules, who takes better care of his heroin habit than he does of his daughter. Baby's gift is a genius for spinning stories and for cherishing the small crumbs of happiness that fall into her lap. But her blossoming beauty has captured the attention of a charismatic and dangerous local pimp who runs an army of sad, slavishly devoted girls. A volatile, volatile situation, even the normally oblivious Jules cannot ignore. And when an escape disguised, as betrayal threatens to crush Baby spirit, she will ultimately, ultimately realize that the power of salvation rests in her hands alone. This book is the winner of Canada Reads 2007, and the Hugh McClendon prize for fiction in 2007 plus eight other prestigious awards. File this one Dewey Decimal heads under 816.6 for American Letters of the 21st century. That seems a bit off, but we're gonna go with it. Catherine, tell us about your relationship with Lullabies for Little Criminals, the book you received in the mail while writing for this blog as a new mom by Heather O'Neill.

**Catherine:**

<laugh>. Yeah, so it's, it, you know, I was reading it and I, I was, again, just like how it was with Obasan, you just swallowed the book whole, and because that's what I feel like when you get a book, good book, it feels like it's an actual meal. You're eating it bite by bite, and it's inside of you. Uh, so much so that it, it's, it's inside of you for like the next while, like you're digesting it over the, like, weeks, uh, after finishing it. And, uh, imagine that, you know, I'm writing this soulless blog, uh, you know, for this blog company that really is advertorial, like, these are articles where, yeah, you're just trying to get people to buy things. Uh, then it's a, as well, I'm writing for a national newspaper, and it's a nuptials column, and I'm interviewing newlyweds about how they met and everything.

**Catherine:**

Again, not really my thing, but it, it pays the bills and it's right next to the obituaries, like completely soulless kind of stuff, soul sucking kind of material. And to receive this book and to e just to swallow it whole, I realize I'm like, wait a minute, I can do this. I can write like this. And also the way that, the way that Heather was painting the picture of, of the working class poor in Montreal, I knew that there was a story to be told about Scarborough as well. That somehow, yes, somehow I could say something like this and be respectful, because if, if you read the novel, there is, is such a sense of respect for the characters. Uh, because one thing that really bothers me is that, you know, you, when you read a book and you have someone from, uh, who has, who has lived a very privileged life painting a picture of people who are of less privileged, it, I can smell it from a mile away.

**Catherine:**

And there was something about the way Heather had such a sense of compassion for, for, for people that, uh, in are often considered to be lowlives, and to, to give them respect for their choices. E even for people who we, we feel are, are horrible, um, uh, like sex traffickers. And, and like she, she gave them, she gave them a moment, she gave them compassion, she gave them heart, she gave them dimension.

And I remember reading it weeping and, and, um, thinking about how much it reminded me of people in Scarborough, uh, that I, I knew that there was a possibility there again, you know, like, you know, you see a possibility with, with Joy Kagawa, now there's this possibility with Heather O'Neill, um, you know, like, uh, that, that you can make and create work that matters, that it doesn't have to be, you know, uh, high class people that are warring over a dinner table, which is something so typical that you see in, in all media. Like, you know, you know, I don't know what it is with like rich people and their dinner parties, but they should just stop having dinner parties because it, the dinner parties never end well, <laugh>. And so, you know, you just reading, uh, you know, a lot of material

**Neil:**

I mean, even just like shows like big, big little eyes, you know? Yes. That the, the, there's the trope of Yeah, I hear what you're saying. And there's the trope of like, you get interested in the drama of wealth, but what this book does, people, people magazine on the back says, it probably would be, um, that might be considered an offensive quote today, but it says A vivid Portrait of Life on Skid Row. And as you say, there's, there's pimps, there's junkies, there's, I mean, even the words I'm using are, are kind of derogatory, but there's, there's people from Heather O'Neal says in the introduction, I'm, I'm, I knew I was gonna take the reader to places that they hadn't seen before. Um, and even I'm on page 135 now. I find this novel absolutely gripping, but I'm slowing down because it's almost like, and sometimes it's too intense for me to read mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, some of the scenes of, uh, there's scenes of child abuse, right? Like dark, pretty dark scenes of abuse, um, that slow me down. But also it's shining a light on a part of life that we don't, we don't often see in books.

**Catherine:**

No, absolutely. And, and there's a fearlessness with the how, like Heather writes that, uh, is something that I, I hope to have as a writer as well. Um, and I, I respect her. I respect her work. And, um, you know, just the fact that we're, we're now colleagues is, is, is now, you know, part of the same community of, of Can Lit authors is such a <laugh>. It's, it really is such an honor. Like, to think about the fact that, you know, I was just this mom, uh, receiving this mail, uh, writing, uh, crappy, crappy things, uh, to being like a colleague of hers. It's, it, it really does feel so wonderful. And it just goes to show you, again, like, you know, anybody who's an artist out there is just to know is that if there's something that's speaking to you, if, if you're, if you feel like, you know, I can do this too, the truth is you can, you can just, just, just, even if it's not for money, just just write, just paint, just dance. Do all the things because, uh, you have to just trust that the universe is trying to tell you something.

**Neil:**

Hmm. I love that. And I love also just the randomness of it. Cuz I feel like these days, you know, with the algorithms that we all follow and subscribe to, and we're kind of forced into whether it's, you know, even the books that the front of the books are today, of course, are partially determined by how many followers they have on TikTok, right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And to get a random book in the mail teaches us something about the value of discoverability, right? The value of discoverability, of, of finding things you don't know you're looking for. Right? We did a chapter, uh, chapter 99 with Doug, the book seller in his bookstore. And the whole point of that chapter was, you know, Amazon can tell you what you're looking for if you type it in, but the whole point and pleasure of getting a package in the mail with something unknown inside is it's a magic box and it could take you a new direction.

**Neil:**



So, you know, what an incredible gift it was for you, but also what a good reminder for all of us that we should increase the randomness at, at which, how books come into our lives. Cuz you, you can't predict them based on algorithms. You can't predict them necessarily based on recommendations. And I think right now in the book industry, you know, it's, it's like anything, it's the rich get richer. I mean, what I'm saying is the book that sells a lot will continue to sell a lot more because as a result of its selling a lot stays on the bestseller lists, it gets put at the front of the bookstore. And, and books that aren't as well known have a harder time getting traction. I mean, Scarborough has done phenomenally well. You've had awards up the wazoo, it's turned into a movie. And yet I would guess, and I don't mean this in any negative way, but I would guess that it's not as big as it could be and I would say should be outside of North America or outside of Canada. And why is that? Like, to me, that's, that is a question that I, I kind of almost put at the feet of the book industry. Like, why cannot we make stories that are deeply resonant in one community, go further outside them?

**Catherine:**

Well, you know, having, you know, when, when you get into certain countries, uh, specifically the US is that there is an expectation that you're gonna create something that Americans will understand because it can, it is similar to what they know, which is to me a very strange way of going about reading. Cuz when I'm reading, I don't expect that the lives of, or the, you know, anything that the, the terms that the characters are referring to are gonna be the same as what I know. Uh, but there is an expectation Yeah. In the States that if, um, uh, if you're gonna mention a certain term, it has to be in American English, not Canadian English, for example. Right. And

**Neil:**

Right and, even the brands and the chains and stuff like that.

**Catherine:**

Yes. So, which is strange because I'm like, but then don't you want to travel in your mind to somewhere else? Don't you want to be open to other ideas? But in the, uh, with the American publishing industry is that no, they do not want those terms. They, they cannot exist in your manuscript, and so you have to shift them. Um, and, uh, there was even, uh, some discussion with another novel of mine about shifting things so that it wasn't gonna take place in Toronto at all. And then it was going to just take place in some kind of like, kind of some nameless, magical place. You know what I mean? Like, it just, it's, it's, it's not, it's a place that's not named or a fictional city. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yes. And, and I was like, I was really speci. I said, no, I really needed to take place in Canada because Canadians really, really, uh, are quite smug about this idea that we, uh, that we're such an accepting nation that, uh, we're, we're, we're so loving.

**Catherine:**

Um, and, and, but the truth is, is that our nation was, was born out of genocide. It continues to, uh, um, create a campaign of genocide against indigenous people on Turtle Island. And so it was really important to me that like, you know, the, the place for this, for this novel. Um, but, you know, like that, those are the kinds of things where I, I have a, a real beef with how, uh, interested in international sales go is is, is just like, what, what do, what do certain communities crave? And then they, and that they're, um, industries, you know, television, film, and, and, um, and like all kinds of media, what they're trying to do is they're trying to catch the wave of a zeitgeist. And the problem with that is that there's no magic ball that you can actually predict those things. Like, it's impossible to predict those things. And, and yet they

try. And so it means that audiences are always skewed to what they supposedly crave instead of what could, what are the possibilities of where their mind can go?

**Neil:**

Mm. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

**Neil:**

And, um, you know, perhaps for, perhaps, you know, this is also just part of the value of going to bookstores, right? Because in a bookstore, you've got a, a book seller who is running their own bookshop and they're curating off of catalogs on lists and picking things up and getting them from different ideas and places. So then you, you, you get confronted with otherness as Kevin Kelly would say. He's, we interviewed him in chapter 110, you know, he said the purpose of travel is to be confronted with otherness. It's not to be pampered, right. It's to be confronted with otherness. And I loved that phrase, and it's kind of speaking to me in terms of how you're speaking. And so this book will show you otherness, <laugh>, I Lullabies for Criminals. It certainly is show showing that to you and me. And for you, it seems to have sparked an idea that I can write a book like this too.

**Neil:**

And you have, and you have, and you, you know, here you are winning the same awards that she's won. I mean, you're both on Canada Ree\ads, you know, for people that don't know, that's, that's, uh, that's a, you know, a really prominent literary show here in Canada. Now, you just said a phrase that I wanna kind of open up a little bit more because the majority of three books listeners are not from Canada. I know I'm from Canada, you're from Canada, so we're using some Canadian isms here. And if you're British or you're American, you catch on some of them. But, you know, a lot of our listeners are from India and from Japan and from Australia and from Korea and from Brazil, and hide everybody from all over the world. We call 'em three bookers. And we, we love this, this community. But you just said, you said, hi, everybody.

**Neil:**

You just said this, this, this country was founded on genocide and the genocide of the people of Turtle Island. Can you open that up a little bit more? So for people that don't have the background, and I'm gonna throw myself in there. Okay. Like, you know, just, just you, you, you said it with such confidence and clarity and conviction that I'm like, tell me the story that you understand as the founding of this country so that I can understand how you see it. Just for my own education and learning. It's certainly not what I learned in grade 10 history, so I know

**Catherine:**

No absolutely, same here.

**Neil:**

It's continuing. Yeah. My education is continuing. And how else to learn it other than asking. So tell me how you came to know how the, how Canada was founded and how, you know, what's, what's the version of the story that you, you have today?

**Catherine:**

Um, yeah, and I'll, I'll try to give this as, as much as possible in like, uh, in a, in a nutshell, um, is that, uh, the way that this country was founded and the, the, you know, like what we see right now as, as Canada and, you know, our access to water, access to all, all of these resources, simply because the indigenous folks who were here for, uh, for thousands and thousands of years, that they have been systemically relocated. Uh, some of them murdered, some of them disconnected with their families, with their language taken away, uh, put into reservations that were far away from, uh, access to resources such as water education, uh, food, um, in order for us to have access to this land and for it to operate the way that it does now. And so, as someone who came here, uh, as a settler, cuz I, I consider myself a settler because even though my parents came from the Philippines escaping martial law in the Philippines, is that, um, they did have choice.

**Catherine:**

They had a choice, uh, between countries. Um, and also when they came here, they did have access to, um, education and to employment, to water. Um, and, uh, I've al I've never been taken away from my parents. I've always had access to water. Uh, I don't have to worry about my relationship with cops. And so, um, you know, for, for me, I have to, as a, as a settler, I have to be very aware of, uh, how much privilege I have walking through this land. And, um, I not only acknowledge how much, uh, privilege I am afforded in life because of the, uh, systemic, uh, oppression against indigenous people here. It's, it's that I have to be in partnership with them to end the system of genocide against them. And I have to be, um, uh, I, I I, I have to be in partnership with them in order to, uh, steward this land properly, um, with, with love and, uh, with, um, uh, with a respect for their traditions.

**Neil:**

Wow. And is your, did I read that your partner is from an indigenous community?

**Catherine:**

Uh, yes, they are. Um, they are from the Navajo Nation. Yes.

**Neil:**

And, and the Navajo Nation is, um, uh, what is the Navajo Nation?

**Catherine:**

Uh, they are in, um, Southwest United States.

**Neil:**

Oh ok

**Catherine:**

What is, what is known as the United States now? Yeah.

**Neil:**

Okay. Okay. So the Navajo Nation is, um, uh, an indigenous community that's largely based or historically based and currently based in the, in the southwest United States. And as a result, I'm assuming of your relationship, you, you've gotten to know and understand elements of the community

and the stories in that community a lot better than, than someone like me who didn't even know where they were based <laugh>, you know, geographically.

**Catherine:**

No, no, I, I think that it, it actually started cuz I, I was very ignorant and I have to make, I have to say I was an extreme, like, you know, like a, like a lot of people who are settlers is that, um, you just go about your life not really understanding like, how did I arrive here? How did, like, you know, what is the, the historical context of me being on this land? Like, you don't even think about those things. Um, until I became the marketing person at, uh, Native Earth Performing Arts, which is a, the Canada's oldest professional indigenous theater company. And I didn't really know anything. I just wanted a job. And with a lot of patience from them, uh, from the people in the community, I, uh, was slowly educated. I, my education still continues today and, uh, definitely made a lot of mistakes. And I am, uh, I, I feel very humbled by my experiences and, uh, again, I, I continue to learn. Um, and that, that, so that was like the, the first time I sort of understood the bigger picture. Um, because I, I, I really did, I really did take for granted um, my position in society. And, uh, since then, just as an artist, like trying my best to, to ally with them every day.

**Neil:**

Yeah. I'm so curious. I mean, I just, I just like, it's like, um, uh, you know, I'm, I'm curious about the values and, and the traditions and, you know, the, um, you know, uh, uh, ways of living that you've learned from your partner or that you are kind of together stewarding forward in your life. I, I mean, I'm, to the extent you're comfortable to share be so interesting to learn more.

**Catherine:**

Yeah. Well, I think that the number one thing is that as a couple, we're brown, we're, uh, gender nonconforming, we're, um, obviously queer in this, uh, you know, like in this world is that, uh, part of it is just an agreement that we hold each other accountable, uh, for our, uh, the way that we walk through this world with each other, with people, um, outside of us. And we are visible. We try to be as visible as possible about our love because, you know, like our, our, our wedding, um, in like, on, uh, my par my, uh, partner's reservation, it was the first wedding there, like a queer wedding, uh, since the time of, of, uh, colonization. And for us to, for us to do that.

**Neil:**

That was in Canada or the US?

**Catherine:**

Uh, no, no, in, in the States. Southwest US in Arizona, yeah. In Arizona and mm-hmm. <affirmative>, we wanted to make sure that it was as public as possible because we wanted people to see what our love looked like. That love is, uh, about, about being responsible for each other, and that it could look different and that's okay. It's actually really beautiful. So we really do share our journey a lot on social media, um, because it's important so that if there are anybody, you know, especially, you know, closeted folks in the indigenous community or in the Filipino community, that they are seeing the possibilities of what love could look like for them. And we know that because of us being public, that we have had, um, several different people from, uh, from like various communities saying like, I, I think I, you know, these things are possible for me too.

**Catherine:**

So that's, that's wonderful. There, there are a lot of people that are actually wanting, um, they're, they're, they're wanting to get married, um, in, in the Navajo nation, like wanting to get married, very similar to what we had done, uh, wanting to know, like how that actually happened. And it really did take like a lot of allyship on the part of my mother-in-law. And, uh, our, our sister-in-laws, like, I, like they all like, get banded together to make sure that our day was going to be special. Um, you know, the entire family, uh, you know, really worked hard to make sure that we were gonna have a traditional ceremony as anybody would in, in a wedding. Um, and, uh, it was, it was really wonderful. Like, I, I feel, um, I feel really blessed that we had that moment.

**Neil:**

And I feel really blessed that you're, you're sharing with all of us. I, you know, growing up I went to a lot of Hindu weddings, um, taking place over several days. Typically, the groom who's adorned in, in, um, kind of like a gold hat, uh, and white clothing, you know, comes in riding a horse typically with, um, you know, a a small, you know, a a cousin or a nephew or somebody riding with him. Um, and then there's an exchange of garlands between the families. So like the, you know, the father-in-law puts a garland on the other father-in-law, and then there's a kind of a jovial lifting of each other, or hugging of each other. And they go inside the, the ceremonies are typically smokey around a fire. There's a pundit who's conducting a ceremony, uh, in Langu, you know, usually in, in Hindi or Punjabi or language.

**Neil:**

I, I didn't personally understand growing up. But then there's, you know, a See, I, as I get older and went to a number of them, I get to see like some of the traditions of, you know, stepping around the fire and taking steps together to kind of metaphorically mark the idea that you're gonna be stepping through life together. Are there elements of the, um, the Navajo Nation wedding, the first one since colonization that you had down in, in Arizona, elements of the ceremony or, uh, parts of the tradition that you brought to life, uh, in your own way. I know it was, uh, combined with the Filipino wedding, so I don't know if it was, if it was half and half or, or you followed one that are traditions more than the other. But this is really interesting and I, I, I just, I just have to keep asking cause I'm so curious and I'll, I'll stop there. But what other, what are the elements of the wedding ceremony that, that you can share with us so we can learn?

**Catherine:**

Uh, well, it was actually like a full, like, Navajo wedding. Like it wasn't, there wasn't really any, there weren't any, uh, Filipino elements in it, because this was specifically like, because we had three weddings. One was like the shotgun wedding, just to get the paperwork started for immigration. Yeah. <laugh>. Then there was the Toronto wedding. Yeah. Which, you know, with the white dress and the suit and all that stuff. And then this one was like in, on the res, um, in what's called the hogan, uh, that is a, um, a sacred dwelling. And, uh, we, and, and, um, we, the, the main thing, instead of exchanging rings, what you understand that the covenant is sort of is done, is that we both, uh, shared corn mush, purple corn mush on a woven basket. And we listened to teachings from Charlie Salt, who is our uncle and medicine man.

**Catherine:**

Uh, and, uh, we listened to teachings from his wife who, um, it was really important to just basically to hear from his wife saying that people like us have existed since time I memorial that, uh, um, queer folks

have been part of the community that we have, um, that we are, we're, we're, we're unique, and yet we are part of the community and that we are loved. And, um, that, uh, and, and, uh, what else happened during the this ceremony, but we basically, you're sitting there and

**Neil:**

What were you wearing? What were you wearing?

**Catherine:**

Um, I was wearing, uh, just like a, a, a loose skirt. Um, and, uh, I, I wore a something that is like a Filipino indigenous, like from the Taboli tribe, which is like a, a special beaded belt. And my hair was, uh, tied up in what's called a ciell, uh, which is like, uh, a bunch of, um, uh, like, uh, it's a cotton yarn that, uh, ties your hair up, uh, and, uh, a lot of turquoise jewelry.

**Catherine:**

And, uh, my partner also, uh, uh, yeah, we both wore like, um, the Navajo moccasins, uh, which are called, uh, kélchí. And, um, yeah, it, it was just really beautiful. And also just to see that my, my partner that they were, they got to wear, um, their traditional dress that is traditionally for masculine folks, um, that they felt, they felt like themselves. And that was really beautiful for me. Like, I, I, I felt, um, I, I, I, I was so happy because I know that this was something that they had dreamed up for like a really long time, like to be married in this way and, uh, for their dream to come true, thanks to the hard work of, uh, my mother-in-law and my sisters-in-law. Like, it, it, I, I can't tell you how thankful I am that everyone was there, and, you know, it was a smaller gathering just because not everybody is so acceptable.

**Catherine:**

Like, you know, like not everyone's gonna accept it just because, you know, there are people who are, you know, converted into Christians and, and stuff that, that, um, felt, you know, uh, that they were offended by our, uh, wedding. But, you know, you just have to be like, you know what, the group that's here is meant to be here. Um, so there were about like 30 people there. Um, and, uh, we were happy for it. We were like, this is, this is what matters. People had flown, um, had, uh, flown in also from California because my partner was living in California before meeting me. So there were friends there from Oakland who, uh, came to celebrate with us. And so, uh, it was, it was wonderful. It, it, it mattered to us that we were loved. And, um, and, and it's not like, you know, that there's dances or, you know, because may, you know, like how it would be like with the Filipino wedding, for example, where it's a lot of dancing and eating.

**Catherine:**

There was definitely eating, but, uh, it was more like you sit there and you listen to everybody giving you advice and a lot of crying because people are just so touched by the moment. And, um, and I gotta say that that wedding for me was so special just because I think that's what a, a wedding should be. It's not about the throwing of the bouquet and, and, and what kind of dresses is everyone wearing and, and, uh, the photography session and all that. Like, for me, it's about making sure that we have a marriage that's gonna be strong. And so, getting all of this advice from people who have been married for years and years, um, ha was, uh, for me, uh, a beautiful moment.

**Neil:**

It sounds like an incredibly beautiful moment, and I'm so grateful for you to just take us a little few steps into the window of, of your, of your wedding. Congratulations. And, and just, uh, I've been smiling the whole time listening <laugh> listen to it. The, the Purple corn mush and the moccasins and, and the medicine man. And it's just, just, weddings are just such a wonderful window, and it's so hard to access, you know, these traditions with without asking. So thank you so much for, for taking us and giving us a peek. Um, so now you know, we're gonna flash forward again. Okay. So we, you get in, you get inspired to, to write Scarborough because of reading Lullaby for Little Criminals, which I'm excited to finish in, in the next couple weeks. And then somehow over the last few years, you encounter a book called 15 Dogs by Andre Alexis.

**Neil:**

I'm holding the paper back in my hand. Oh my gosh. I just realized it has the exact same three stickers, I think on the cover, <laugh>, as your book does. It's got this, it's got the, it's got the Canada Reads, it's Got my eyes are, or because there's, oh, it's, it's got the Scotiabank Giller Prize winner, and it's got 15 Dogs in kind of a, a cursive italic font with two black dog silhouettes in the background. A really fascinating plot on this one, I wonder, said Hermes, what it would be like if animals had human intelligence. I will wager a year's servitude answered Apollo that animals any animal you like, would be even more unhappy than humans are if they were given human intelligence. And so it begins a bet between the gods Hermes and Apollo leads them to grant human consciousness and language to a group of dogs overnighting in a Toronto veterinary clinic, suddenly capable of more complex thought. The pack is torn between those who resist the new ways of thinking, preferring the old dog ways, and those who embrace the change by turns, meditative and devastating, charming and strange. 15 Dogs shows you can teach an old genre new tricks. <laugh>. Catherine, please tell us about your relationship with the multiple award-winning 2017. Uh, I wanna say classic now, because won so many awards, 15 Dogs by Andre Alexis.

**Catherine:**

Oh my gosh. And also like standing ovation for whoever wrote that jacket cover. So good. <laugh>. Um, no cause except, you know, some jacket covers are not well written. This one was well written. Um, I, okay. For me, when you were asking me about three books that, you know, blew me away that have affected me, is that I wanted to show you a book that I cannot stop thinking about how it has to be adapted into a film or television series as that. Because, you know, if, if people don't know is that I was the one who actually adapted my book Scarborough into a film, le that's just natu'al for me. And when I read a book, all I'm thinking about is how I can make it into a film. I've been doing that since I was a kid. I always see things in multiple mediums, uh, when I'm reading or if I'm watching, uh, a movie, I'm wondering how it was as a book or, you know, like, you know, whatever it is. Like I, I'm, I'm, I love imagining things in different ways. And so for this book, I, I could not stop reading it and rereading it, thinking about how it would be adapted. And, you know, no offense if there is somebody out there, I, I'm assuming, I'm assuming that someone's developing it somewhere because it's such a, um, it, you know, like a a, a celebrated novel. I I am assuming that someone optioned it and someone was developing it, so no, no, uh, offense to whoever that person is, but I, I don't know.

**Neil:**

I don't know Catherine. It might be, it might be you in 2023.

**Catherine:**

Well and that's the thing is that I can't tell you like Neil, like I have been passive aggressively trying to mention how much I love this book over and over again and how much I want to adapt it, because in the hope that someone is gonna call me up to say, yes, you, you, you're the person to do it. Um, uh, like hoping that a producer will take it on. Cuz I just know that it's, it's such a, um, a well loved book. Uh, it's odd and, um, for me, okay, so if I was to pitch this as a television series or a film, is that the tone that I imagine is that if you look at that, you know, that painting, that creepy painting of the dog's playing poker, you know, like that weird feeling? It's so

Neil:

It's so funny. As soon as you said that, you know, that painting, I, that's the first thing I saw.

**Catherine:**

Yes. Yes

**Neil:**

Totally. I totally know that painting

**Catherine:**

it's that weird feeling is that why is it that, that there's like this odd sensation that goes through your body when you see that painting is that it's odd. It's like, why is there a dog playing poker? Is that it would be live action with animated mouths on these dogs who take on these human characteristics and their relationships with their owners. Um, and, uh, you, you see, and you know, if it was a series, it would be basically each, each episode would be, um, focused on one of the dogs. And again, like there's this one dog that learns to write poetry, for example, there's this one dog that develops this really deep relationship with his owner to the point where, you know, they'll, they'll sit and they'll talk in the morning and, uh, um, like chat about things, uh, about life and love.

**Catherine:**

And, uh, there's, there's another dog who ends up having like really abusive, uh, parents who end up, uh, leaving him, like abandoning him in a, uh, a house. And, uh, so each episode would be that. And, but purely from the point of view of these dogs, and I just know it, I just know that it would just be brilliant. It would be the kind of show that people would watch it. It's, it's odd. It, it's, it's, it's weird. Um, you, you know, like that, like, it's, it's a mix between that, that painting that I was just mentioning of the dogs playing poker and also that weird world that the, you know, those the Muppet movies would take, you know, where people are sort of like, with this puppet and they're talking and it, it's sort of surreal, but it's not, it's realistic, but it's not like it, I, uh, it, it, it would be, it would be such a ride. I just know. Um, and I've been, I've been waiting for someone to say, yes, <laugh> to me doing this because I haven't yet pitched it.

**Neil:**

Well, you gotta

**Catherine:**

It has to happen.



**Neil:**

Well, that's the thing I was gonna say is like, you gotta, it's gotta be you reaching, look, the first movie you've, we've written is just won a slew for those that know was nominated for 11 Canadians, uh, film awards, a one, eight of them, including best picture and best writing and best actor. So you've gotta, now you got the resume to reach out. And by the way, for me, I struggled, I struggled to read this, I tried to read it. I have not read it yet. Yeah. It reminded me a lot of Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson. I don't know if you know that book, but back in chapter 29 of the show, we talked to Michael Harris, who you might know, he's the author of Solitude. Um, he's a Canadian writer. He lives in Vancouver. Um, and, you know, he, and one of his formative books was called Autobiography of Red.

**Neil:**

Again, it's like almost poetic, but it's so, um, strange as you, as you said, I mean, it starts with the bet between Gods and you don't know what's happening and then all these dogs are given human sentience and, you know, it's a, it's a wild tale, but it does things that only books can do, right? Yes. Like, you can't, you can't make that ha unless, unless Cath, unless, unless you, Catherine Hernandez is about to adapt it into a TV show or a movie. But, you know, maybe the challenge has been how, you know, maybe the challenge, you have a vision for it. So now we gotta

**Catherine:**

Oh I totally have a vision. It's, you know, what it is, is that there's something about the simple ways that the dogs express themselves because now they have a human reasoning that they express themselves, that the profundity of humanity is revealed, which is, you know, cuz their relationship mm-hmm. <affirmative> with humans. So, uh, like for example, this one dog, uh, watches his parents and sees that they get into B D S M and he realizes, wait a minute, if this woman is dominating this man, and if this is how she's controlling him, then I can dominate him too. And so he starts to, I think what he does, I can try to remember what the dog does. I think he starts to pee on his pillow, and it would become like, wait, almost like, like, I'm gonna be your, I'm gonna be part of this B D S M as well, because he's watching the B D S M.

**Catherine:**

I thought that was so funny. Um, so anyway, I, I, um, I just, and I could, I might be misremembering that, that moment, but, uh, I just think that, uh, I think that the way that this, this, uh, movie has to be is it really does have to be from not just waist high, which is, you know, Scarborough, the film was definitely waist high for the, the height of these children. It was mostly shot from waist high, is that it has to be shot from like, you know, calf high or ankle high, depending on how tall these dogs are. Um, but looking at the, the, the strange humanity that is revealed through dog's eyes when they are given human reason. So, uh, yeah, like I, I, I just, I, I hope that it happens. I mean, like I, I've met André, uh, a few times. I think that he's so fabulous and I try not to fan girl over him every time I meet him. Um, but, uh, I, I really do hope, I mean, even if it's not me, I just, I hope that it exists one day because it, it really does deserve to be put into a different medium.

**Neil:**

Mm. Well, look, this is how the universe responds, right? You, you cast, you cast out fishing lines, with energy and then, and then it comes back. I think hopefully we'll look back on this conversation as a way you put it out into the universe. Catherine, it's been a joy and a privilege, and I just looked at the clock. I can't believe how long we've been talking for an hour and a half. It's been, it's been a real joy. I wonder

if we might be able to close off this wonderful conversation, hop scotching through your life and your formative books by ending with a few fast money round questions. Are you up for that?

**Catherine:**

Uh, sure, sure.

**Neil:**

Okay. First question, hard cover paperback audio or e

**Catherine:**

Aw paperback paperback, because I am sadly, um, I'm one of those people who bend it. I do, I do. I can't, I can't help it. I also doggy ear my pages

**Neil:**

Don't, don't, uh, no book, no book guilt, no book shame that applies to how you treat your books. It's okay. Uh, yeah. My, my grandfather in-law just took out a potted plant on the weekend, and underneath was a copy of *When Breath Becomes Air*, literally turning back into breath and air underneath the potted plant. I looked at him horror struck, and he is like, no book guilt, no book shame. I mean, I'm, the book is, I've read it. It's in me, and now it's supporting a plant. Okay.

**Catherine:**

It's hilarious.

**Neil:**

Uh, number two, how do you organize your books on your bookshelf?

**Catherine:**

Uh, I do organize it like, from, um, different communities. Uh, so I, I understand that like, I make sure that I give a lot of attention to, like, for example, like indigenous authors, um, people from the black diaspora, uh, people from the queer umbrella. Like, I make sure that I divide it that way, that way I make sure that I'm giving equal, like, attention to all sections of my bookshelf.

**Neil:**

Wow. Interesting. Uh, what is your favorite bookstore living or dead?

**Catherine:**

Uh, always, always, always. It has to be Another Story bookshop, uh, because they are, they work very, very hard for Canadian authors to, uh, to hustle our books all the time. And so I love them dearly, and so they get my vote for sure.

**Neil:**

Wonderful. And for those that don't know that is in the Roncesvalles neighborhood of Toronto, um, do you have a favorite kids' book? I know you're also a, a multiple time published kids book author. Do you have a favorite kids' book that you find yourself recommending or gifting over and over again?

**Catherine:**

Um, I love, uh, Shel Silverstein, so, uh, any of his books. Uh, but when I was a kid, I loved Where The Sidewalk Ends.

**Neil:**

Mm. Nice. That, by the way, that's the very first book ever mentioned on this show ever <laugh>, um, by my wife. Um, and two last questions. Do you have a white whale book or a book you've been trying to, trying to read for a very, very long time?

**Catherine:**

It's, uh, you know, um, it's my, my partner has a very extensive non-fiction section, so it's not just one book, it's, it's many books. I feel he's look at the white whale section, and you know what it is, is that like I have a really difficult time reading really academic books, but I, I wanna challenge myself to, to read more of, of those books. And right now I'm, uh, I'm finally getting into them and I'm, right now I'm, I'm very much enjoying Cultish that, that book Cultish, which is about, the, the language of fanaticism. Yeah, yeah,

**Neil:**

Yeah, yeah. I just, I just read that book. I really, really good. Enjoyed it. Yeah. That's a, that's a, yeah, that's a wonderfully interesting and insightful and wordy book. Um, and then finally, very last question is you are, uh, an extremely kind of recognizable writer, a author, playwright, uh, children's book author and artist of all stripes. Is there one hard fought piece of wisdom you might share with the three bookers listening around the world who are aspiring to lean in to that side of themselves a little bit more?

**Catherine:**

So it's, uh, don't, uh, I would say don't focus on becoming a writer. Focus on telling a story. Uh, and so it's, it's not about putting on this little costume and, and, uh, pretending to be an artist. It's about creating art. All you have to do is just listen to what the universe is trying to tell you and commit it to the page.

**Neil:**

Catherine Hernandez, thank you so much for coming on 3 Books. It's been a real joy connecting to you. Thank you so much.

**Catherine:**

Thank you so much for having me.