



Library podcast

Bonnie Garmus and Nancy Pearl in conversation for "Lessons in Chemistry"

00:00:15 Misha

Look at that. You all know how to be in a crowd again. I love it. Thank you so much. My name is Misha Stone, she/her, and I'm a librarian here at the Central Library. Again, thank you so much for coming out tonight and coming on a cold night and sitting so close to all of your neighbors. We appreciate you. Thank you so much for coming out tonight to see Bonnie Garmus and Nancy Pearl in conversation. And again, we're just so thrilled to have so many of you here with us tonight. Before we begin, I want to acknowledge that The Seattle Public Library is on Indigenous land. These are the traditional unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, specifically the Duwamish people. This event is supported by The Seattle Public Library Foundation. So many thanks to the foundation author series sponsor Gary Cunis and media sponsor of The Seattle Times, and presented in partnership with our good friends at Third Place Books.

00:01:19 Misha

I just want to say that it's so wonderful also to have Bonnie back here in Seattle because we will forever claim you as a Seattle author from here until eternity. Just going to say, and before I turn this over for proper introductions to Spencer at Third Place, I wanted to just mention a few events that you may have seen up here on the screen. Coming up this Saturday, February 25, at 2:30 in the afternoon, E. Lily Yu, who won the Washington State Book Award for her debut novel *On Fragile Waves*, will be here Friday, March 10, during AWP, will have a reading with the Institute of American Indian Arts and the Author's Guild. And that's at 7:30 on March 10. And then we also have on Wednesday, March 15, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai who's discussing *Dust Child* at 07:00. So, without further ado, going to hand this over to Spencer from Third Place Books.

00:02:19 Spencer

Good evening everyone, and thank you so much, Misha. As Misha said. My name is Spencer Rukdi. I'm the author of events manager at Third Place Books. If you don't know us, we have three locations across Seattle in Lake Force Park, Ravenna and Seward Park. A really special thank you to Misha and Linda Johns, who who were not only instrumental in making this event happen, but literally the only way that this event would have happened. Librarians are people who care for you without concern for profit. And that's something that's truly unique and special in this world. So I just want to thank all the librarians here, the archivists, the security personnel, all of the people who can make something like this in person experience happen tonight.

00:03:11 Spencer

We are going to continue working with the library to host events in this space, which is really exciting this year. You may not be familiar with his work, but we will be hosting on April 5 the Romanian author Mircea Cărtărescu, whose new novel *Solenoid* was translated by Sean Cotter. While you may not have heard of him. You will when he wins the Nobel Prize and you have heard of him first. Here you can find our full events calendar and sign up for a newsletter@thirdplacebooks.com. I want to play a little bit of a numbers game. How many copies of *Lessons in Chemistry* do you think are available at The Seattle Public Library? Shout it out. Oh, I should rephrase that. Do you think they once had in stock? I should maybe I think I heard 350? It's 357. According to when I checked Tuesday, I actually didn't know libraries stocked that many copies of of single titles. Yeah. Oh, yes. The Peak Pick did it. Now, can you guess how many of those holds are on those copies?

00:04:29 Spencer

978. No. I would never, ever dismay a reader from using their public library. But if you would like to have them available for you tonight, we do have copies over here at this table. Bonnie will be signing. So you can buy- people have bought five. People have bought nine. You can get them for your friends and your mother and grandmother and father. But really, every purchase you make truly supports the future of our author series. I just finished I don't know if there are any booksellers in the crowd tonight. If there are, raise your hand. I just finished a week long conference called Winter Institute, which is where booksellers come from all over the country to just discuss books, the future of literature. They hear what's coming up next. They discuss ideas. They talk about events like the one we're holding tonight. And it's been a really magical week, and I couldn't think of a better way to end it. So, to you, booksellers. Thank you. And without further ado, I am pleased to introduce tonight's speakers. Many of you may already know Bonnie's story, but I do think it's worth repeating. Bonnie Garmus went from being a copywriter and creative director to being a bestselling author. And when I say bestselling, I mean Bonnie's debut, *Lessons in Chemistry*, has spent, I believe, 40 weeks at the top of the New York Times bestseller list.

00:06:01 Spencer

The book is somewhere within its 23rd or 24th printing. I think I lost count. It's recently sold its millionth copy in all formats. There is an Apple TV adaptation of the work starring Brie Larson. Bonnie's publishing story is one I think we hear way too often with a bit of dismay, but also a bit of delight, because her story really does inspire us all. Whether or not you're a writer, whether or not you're just someone with ambitions. In case you haven't read it, Moyera McDonald, the wonderful writer for the Seattle Times, wrote, had a wonderful profile of Bonnie that ran a few weeks ago, or last week, under the headline how Former Seattleite Bonnie Garmus's Debut Novel Became a Bestseller. Bonnie was told by agents and editors and purveyors of foreign rights that this book would not work. And that her quote unquote quirky novel would be met with little success. So Bonnie endured dozens of rejections on previous projects, and now she has one of the finest editors in this country, one of the finest publicity teams. And I'm not just saying that because Todd Doty is sitting over here. And what's more, but certainly maybe not the fulcrum of this story is that Bonnie's debut was published while she was in her sixties. And that is something that happens very rarely in this country. It also gives me a

few more years to finish my novel. So joining Bonnie tonight is Nancy Pearl, the preeminent librarian, best selling author, literary critic, and former executive director of The Washington Center for the Book at Seattle Public Library. She is the creator of the internationally recognized Community Reads program, which began in 1998. As if all Seattle read the same book. A program that is now so pervasive in this country in different cities and communities, whether you're Seattle or New York or Portland or a small town like my hometown of Pocatello, Idaho, I didn't realize that someone actually had to invent that. It's like telling me that someone had to invent like, paper or butter. I just assumed that people did it and figured it out. Her awards are many, but include literary and award for outstanding service to the American literary community by the National Book Foundation. 2021 Book Lust with Nancy Pearl is her monthly show on the Seattle Channel. Without further ado to talk about the life and career of a wonderful novelist, let's please welcome Bonnie Garmus and Nancy Pearl.

00:08:51 Nancy

So, Bonnie.

00:08:52 Bonnie

Yes, Nancy,

00:08:54 Nancy

It's you. First, I just want to say for anyone who hasn't read your book how wonderful it is. Thank you. What a treat it was to read it and to reread it for this interview.

00:09:09 Bonnie

Thank you. I appreciate that.

00:09:11 Nancy

Yeah. Good going, girl.

00:09:13 Bonnie

Thank you.

00:09:15 Nancy

So how did it come about that you wrote this book? How did it come about? (crowd muttering) I don't know if the mic...

00:09:27 Bonnie

(Shouting) A bad mood!

00:09:32 Speaker 1

Yeah, I was in a really bad mood at work one day. I wasn't in Seattle, by the way. I was in the Bay Area at a meeting, but I've worked heavily in Tech in Seattle. I was in a Tech meeting in the Bay Area, and in that meeting it was all men and me. And I had a PowerPoint display with my ideas for a campaign. I was passed over, I was mansplained, all of these things. And at the end of it, the vice

president in the room took credit for all of my ideas even though they were still on the PowerPoint slide. And I said, you know, I just said all of that stuff. Anyway, I went back to my desk and instead of working, I wrote the first chapter of Lessons in Chemistry.

00:10:27 Nancy

So where did Elizabeth come from?

00:10:30 Bonnie

Well, she was actually in a different novel that I'd started years before that, actually, here in Seattle, I'd started. She was a very minor character in that book. There's only three sentences dedicated to Elizabeth Zott in that book. But that day when I was sitting at that desk, I felt like she was sitting there, too, and I felt like she was saying, you think you've had a bad day? I've had a bad decade. And then she felt like I should tell her story. So in this earlier book with Elizabeth, what were those three lines that she appeared to you in that? Well, in that book that book actually starts out with her daughter Madeleine, but she's grown and she has a daughter, and she mentions there's a mention of her young daughter finding a cookbook on a shelf and not understanding that who this was, who Elizabeth Zott was. But she recognizes the picture, but she doesn't know who her grandmother is. And then I just say she was a chemist and she had a TV cooking show, and she was deeply depressed. Nice. And there she was. I'm still depressed.

00:11:50 Nancy

Wow. Right. Sometimes first chapters are pretty easy, and it's the following chapters that get harder.

00:12:02 Bonnie

Yeah,

00:12:03 Nancy

I know. I'm not telling you anything you don't know. What was your experience you had that great first chapter, and then what was your experience following that?

00:12:14 Bonnie

Well, that day, I wrote that first chapter, and then I wrote the last three sentences of the last chapter, not thinking that they would hold, but they did. And then I just had to fill in everything else. I don't write from an outline, so everything else took thousands of pages because that's the way I am. I go down a lot of streets and avenues before I decide which one I'm going to keep.

00:12:41 Nancy

John Irving doesn't start a novel until he knows what the last sentence is, so...

00:12:47 Bonnie

That's good to know.

00:12:50 Nancy

His last book was about 800 pages. (laughter)

00:12:56 Nancy

So you don't use an outline?

00:12:58 Bonnie

No, I don't. And I never used an outline at work, and that used to drive my clients crazy because I wrote a lot of speeches and things, and they'd say, what's this going to be and how are you going to do the flow? And I'd say, Well, I don't know, and that's not good news anyway. And they said, well, we really need to see an outline. And I'd say, well, you really need to get a different writer then.

00:13:31 Nancy

Did you find yourself getting... sometimes when you outline, you limit yourself too much to what's going to happen and not outlining your freer with that. But was there a part of the book that was harder for you to write? I mean, did you write it in that order that we read it, basically?

00:13:57 Bonnie

Well, I mean, there are a lot of things that you're never going to see, but, yeah, that was my order. The way I work is I let the character walk on, and I almost always put them in a bad situation to see what they're going to do, and then that gives me that's really inspiring. You find out pretty quickly, you put someone in a bad situation, all of their flaws are revealed.

00:14:24 Nancy

Yeah. And then you have to rescue them.

00:14:27 Bonnie

Yeah. Some of them.

00:14:30 Nancy

Right.

00:14:31 Bonnie

Some don't get rescued.

00:14:33 Nancy

The good ones get rescued and the bad ones... were you surprised by anything that happened in the book?

00:14:40 Bonnie

Yeah, there's one event where someone yeah. And I didn't know I was going to do that until I did it. And then when my husband read the chapter, he looked at me and he goes, I can't believe you did that. But yeah. No, you have to be able to surprise yourself. If you can't surprise yourself, you're not going to surprise a reader.

00:15:04 Nancy

Right. What was the hardest part for you about working on the book? Finding the time. Really? Because you were still working.

00:15:15 Bonnie

Yeah. And I finally figured out that what I needed to do to finish this book was simply get up early and write really early in the morning before work, and then whatever I had left over for work, energy wise well, was what they got.

00:15:39 Nancy

How did you know when the book was done and when it was done, that first thought that you had, oh, it's done, and then came rewriting, I assume.

00:15:53 Bonnie

Well, I think I'm not unusual to say, I don't feel like it's done. And when my editors were grabbing it from me and saying, It's done, I was like, Just one more thing. In fact, I was just talking to my agent and I said, Could I just change three things? And she said, like, a word, and I said, no. Several pages, but no. She said no.

00:16:17 Nancy

Don't you feel like your characters, like, they're alive and they're off doing things and you just want to capture them?

00:16:27 Bonnie

Yeah, I really feel like they talk to me. It always sounds very mystical when I say that, but I would get up in the morning, I'd hear somebody, it was like knocking on the door, saying, My turn.

00:16:44 Nancy

Do you think you're going to write about Elizabeth or Madeleine? I mean, I know you have that earlier novel, but do you think because when I wrote George and Lizzie, I was so sad, in a way that it was done because I just wanted to spend more time with them. Is that how you felt?

00:17:04 Bonnie

Well, yeah. I really love having Elizabeth in my head and some of the other characters, but I have other characters that they're knocking on the door. No sequel I can foresee. Really. I am one of those writers who think you should leave while people still want you around. Don't overstay your welcome.

00:17:29 Nancy

Really?

00:17:31 Bonnie

Yeah. Maybe I'd write a sequel, but not right away.

00:17:36 Nancy

So talk a little bit about the dog 6:30 who almost stole the show. Who maybe stole the show. Yeah. Where did he come from?

00:17:49 Bonnie

Well, 6:30 is the one character in the book based on our dog Friday. Some of you have met Friday, and Friday is gone now, but we got here, here in Seattle at the shelter, and she had been very badly abused, and her previous owner was sent to jail for the kind of abuse he heaped on our dog. Our kids picked this dog out at the shelter, and she was possibly the ugliest dog my husband and I have ever seen. And our kids just fell in love with her. I remember Sophie, you said, what about this cute one? And my husband and I were going, which cute one? But anyway, she came home with us that day, and she turned out to be just a brilliant dog. And we didn't teach her words. She taught herself words. She also taught herself German. I'm not kidding. Yeah. So that she learned more than she outscored on intelligence, more than the German and Swiss dog. Her SAT scores were excellent. Yeah.

00:19:01 Nancy

Are you a cook?

00:19:02 Bonnie

I hate to cook. I really hate to cook. And I'm not a scientist. I'm not a chemist. So sometimes my agent loves to cook. And so when she first talked to me, she said, what's your favorite thing to make? And I said my favorite meals. A meal someone else makes for me. I'm not interested in cooking. She was just shocked. So why was Elizabeth a cook? Because back then, a woman was not going to be on television unless she was doing something related to the home. So she could either say, here's what's behind door number two? Or she could be cooking or cleaning.

00:19:49 Nancy

Were there characters and other books that you had read? Not that you modeled Elizabeth after, but that influenced your feelings about how you wanted Elizabeth to appear?

00:20:03 Bonnie

Honestly, the truth is I just wrote my own role model. That's what I wanted. I wanted somebody to show me the way, show me out of the kind of environment that I was working in, how I would deal with it. And she certainly especially for the time period, she was a trailblazer, and she would be today, I get a feeling, because we're still not quite as far forward as I'd hoped.

00:20:30 Nancy

Right. When Elizabeth came to you in that form, I mean, I love that you wrote a role model for yourself. I think that when you read the book, then Elizabeth is that because you see how strong she is in difficult situations. You're a rower, and Elizabeth becomes a rower. How did that fit in in your mind?

00:21:03 Bonnie

Because I had to put something in the book I actually knew something about. But honestly, rowing is the sport of balance, and chemistry is the science of balance. And in the book, there is a balance between dark and light. So there's a theme of imbalance in our world, but within the book, I strive for balance.

00:21:31 Nancy

How did you describe the balance?

00:21:33 Bonnie

Well, I was just really interested. The reason why there's humor in the book, despite all the depressing parts, is because I really feel like if you're going to discuss important themes and there are important themes in the book, that in order to be nondidactic, you must deliver it with humor because otherwise no one's going to read it. No one wants to be told to act a certain way or be preached to. So that's why I balanced it, the light with the darkers.

00:22:09 Nancy

What do you want your readers to take from the book?

00:22:13 Bonnie

Well, I think the big thing for me is we live in a very irrational world and we are all bombarded every day with fake news and horrible things happening. And it has just occurred to me lately how much I wish the laws of chemistry were actually the laws that we live by, because those are the laws that actually rule us and the universe and the world. And those laws make a lot of sense if you read them. And so that's one of the reasons why, even though the chemistry was quite difficult to learn and I was studying a textbook from the 50s, boy, that was some low moments in there. Like. Wow. Really? But anyway, that was really important to me that change is something that we are actually very much designed to do. Our bodies change every day. Our minds change every day. Not just in what are we going to eat, but our minds actually change every day. And so we are quite capable of changing a lot of things for the better and we don't have to follow what society tells us to do. I just wish there was a lot more emphasis on the scientific method overall in our society.

00:23:32 Nancy

Well, if you have people who don't believe that science has any meaning...

00:23:37 Bonnie

Scary as hell.

00:23:38 Nancy

Scary, right? What about naming your characters? I'm always really interested in how writers pick the names. And you had already had Elizabeth Zott.

00:23:50 Bonnie

Yeah.

00:23:51 Nancy

And Madeline and her daughter. But what about the other characters? Mr. Donati. And...

00:23:56 Bonnie

I don't know where Donati came from. It was sort of like do not e. But yeah, that was sort of what I was thinking. Phil Lebensmal. Lebensmal means bad life in German. So some of those characters were they kind of named themselves. Elizabeth Zott though has a good story.

00:24:20 Nancy

Good.

00:24:20 Bonnie

Her last name came from a restaurant, a little diner apologies to my husband a little diner in Northern California that we used to frequent when we lived in Palo Alto. And when we were first dating, this is the sort of place with beer tables, picnic tables outside. And when we were first dating, we were there and the place was called Rosatis, but everybody in Palo Alto called it Zach's. And we were discussing, as we always did, some sort of political thing. I think it was medflies at that time. And we were almost always on opposing sides of everything. And David said to me, when I met you, I didn't know you'd have so many opinions. I said, you know what? That's about the worst thing you could have possibly said. I'm pleased to say that, yeah, we got through that one. I think he realized his mistake about 5 seconds later. But anyway, that's where her name came from, from that. So when he first read it, he said, Elizabeth Zott. Well, I know where the name came from, but the others yeah, Madeline. I just like that. She's named for a bad mood. She was mad. And the others Harriet is actually sort of a friend of mine who died. She's not based on Harriet, but that name came from her.

00:25:59 Nancy

And did you write notes in your daughter's lunchboxes?

00:26:05 Bonnie

Sometimes, yeah. They did not keep them. I wasn't as nearly as interesting or creative as Elizabeth was.

00:26:15 Nancy

What about the title of the book? Was that a problem, coming up with a title?

00:26:20 Bonnie

My original title was Introduction to Chemistry. And the night before my agent was taking the book to Frankfurt, she called me in a panic and she said, the Frankfurt Book Fair has slotted your book as nonfiction. We have to change the title right now. And she said, literally, we have about two minutes. And I said, okay. And she goes, how about lessons in chemistry? And I said, okay,

00:26:52 Nancy

That's a good story. That's a good story. Sometimes when I talk to writers, they say that when they're working on a book, they can't read other. Like if they're working on a novel or short stories, they can't read fiction.

00:27:09 Bonnie

Right.

00:27:11 Nancy

Talk about your reading experience,

00:27:14 Bonnie

I'm the same way. I'm trying not to read any fiction, but as you know, I get fiction every day. I can read nonfiction. That's what I prefer to be reading right now, and that's what I'm gravitating towards. But actually, Todd, my publicist, gave me Claire Keegan's book, Foster, and immediately had to start that.

00:27:35 Nancy

Yeah, that's a pretty powerful that's an amazing novel.

00:27:40 Bonnie

Yeah. Novella.

00:27:41 Nancy

Yeah. Were you a were you a reader as a child?

00:27:45 Bonnie

I was a huge reader. I had a terrible stutter as a child. It lasted well into adulthood. It got better, but not great. And as a child, I did not speak very often. I read, and the librarian really took pity on me. But my librarian at our local branch encouraged me. I told her I was going to read every book from this shelf on over. And she goes, There are some you should skip. But she was instrumental in getting me to read everything, and she used to set aside books for me. I remember when I was ten, she gave me The Godfather. My parents were pissed.

00:28:35 Nancy

And that was at the public library?

00:28:37 Bonnie

Yup.

00:28:37 Nancy

Where did you grow up?

00:28:39 Bonnie

Riverside, California.

00:28:41 Nancy

And did you have a library at your school, too?

00:28:44 Bonnie

Yeah, we did. We did.

00:28:45 Nancy

Didn't have the godfather, right?

00:28:48 Bonnie

But yeah, we had a good librarian. I made friends with a librarian there. The librarians in my life were really important to me.

00:28:56 Nancy

And then how did... I always try to feed that question. Maybe it'll elicit the right answer. Good job. When you were growing up, did you feel like Elizabeth does? I mean, you grew up in a different couple of decades later, at least, but did you feel that same way? Do you identify with Elizabeth's feelings about life and chemistry?

00:29:34 Bonnie

Well, what I'm learning is people all over the world identify with Elizabeth's eye and being maligned or passed over or whatever it is. If you have had a barrier put in front of you, you will understand her very well and her feelings about that. And literally just people all over the world. I was just in Dubai and I had a chance to talk with a lot of Arab women, and that was probably one of the best conversations I've had, where Arab women are saying, you think you have problems. Hold on. No, it was really enlightening, though, because just all over the world, people feel exactly the same way and they want more rationality in their lives. They want more rationality in their news, they

00:30:19 Bonnie

want more science in their lives. That's been really incredible to hear that. It's amazing how much alike we are all over the world. And our experiences, our experiences are exactly the same. So that's been really encouraging for me to hear everyone talking about the same thing, men and women.

00:30:42 Nancy

When you were doing the research for this, did you go out and talk to people or how did you do the research for the book?

00:30:53 Bonnie

Nancy, I hate talking to people. I didn't talk to anyone.

00:30:59 Nancy

You can't really hate it.

00:31:03 Bonnie

No, I didn't.

00:31:03 Nancy

Because you're too funny.

00:31:05 Bonnie

No, I didn't talk to anyone. I told one friend I was writing this book about a cooking show host as a chemist, and she said, keep your day job. And I was never able to explain the book well enough, but no, I just wanted Elizabeth to be my creation in my head. I've never really watched cooking shows and I didn't want to watch any because I wanted to create my own cooking show. My husband finally made me watch one episode of Julia Child. This is months after the book was published. And I said, oh, that's pretty good. And my agent is married to Stanley Tucci and he was in it. Yeah. And so he said, I understand that you didn't watch that movie. And I said no. I think I did, didn't I? I don't know. Anyway, he wasn't impressed.

00:32:04 Nancy

When Elizabeth decides that she is going to do the show, the television show, is that the kind of thing that you would like to do, too?

00:32:16 Bonnie

Never. No. Yeah, I'm not interested in being in front of a camera. They offered me a role in the in the series, and I turned it down.

00:32:26 Nancy

So okay, so talk about that.

00:32:28 Bonnie

There's going to be a television series. We learned I learned from Apple on Apple Plus.

00:32:34 Nancy

So how did that talk about that? That must have been exciting and scary at the same time.

00:32:40 Bonnie

It was super exciting. Before the book had been published, I had 38 offers from Hollywood, and it shocked, you know, my agents, and it shocked us all. And I was still actually negotiating a contract with my American publisher when the Hollywood offers started to really stack up, and we decided we had to take it really seriously at that point, and we managed to I have a film agent. So my film agent put in a floor for the bidding, and then with that floor, 30 people, 30 companies dropped out. Eight remained. And then I had to interview all these people on zoom, and they're everybody you've ever seen on a red carpet except without the makeup, and they look totally different. Yeah, it was fantastic,

but it was scary to have these teams of people in my living room talking to me. But Brie Larson actually called me herself. We did a zoom together, and she said, I don't want your agent on this call, because the agents are always on the call. She said no agents. And my agent said, she doesn't mean me, though. And I said, she does. And we talked for about an hour and a half, and we just had a great time. Believe it or not, we first kind of met each other in Seattle. We were here. We both went to the same restaurant one Christmas before Christmas. It was this vegan restaurant. It was somewhat annoying, and I'm not going to name the restaurant, but anyway, it turned out she was there, and my daughter said, That's Brie Larson over there. And I said, who's Brie Larson? Anyway, it turned out we left. We were the first people to leave the restaurant at dinner, and she remembered when she saw me, she said, I know you. You're the family that escaped dessert.

00:34:53 Nancy

So do you have a role in that? Are you able to stand? Do you have any input into the script or anything?

00:35:02 Bonnie

Well, I really wanted to write it, and you did one. Oh, I did want to write it, but the team I chose is Aggregate Films. And Aggregate Films is Jason Bateman and Michael Costigan. Michael Costigan did Brokeback Mountain. He also did Dumb and Dumber, but he doesn't like to talk about and then Brie Larson also wanted to be part of this team as an executive producer. So I said, I want to write it. And they said, what about if we get Susanna Grant? She wrote Erin Brockovich. And I said, okay. And I loved her, so that's really why I went with Aggregate Films. But Susanna had to leave the project almost immediately. Well, after. I think, six months in, because her own green her own movie got green lit, which is really rare, especially post, COVID she's also a director. And she said, I hope you understand. And I said, Hell, yes, I understand. You have to go do that. So then when they brought in another writer, and that didn't really go very well, and she refused to show me anything, but then Brie Larson fired her, so I guess it wasn't going well there either. And then they brought in a third writer and he's been great to work with, but I just read the scripts and I write things like, absolutely not. But they're not required to take anything that I say. They're really wonderful people. The writer is especially wonderful and it's quite different from the book in lots of ways, but Hollywood gets to do that and they should do it because they're creative people, too. It's their visualization. This is imagination. That is visualization. It's two different animals. It'll have the same spirit. I'm excited for it. I really am. Worried, but excited.

00:36:59 Nancy

Right. And when will that be filmed? Right now?

00:37:05 Bonnie

No, it's done. It's in editing,

00:37:07 Nancy

You said...

00:37:08 Bonnie

Yeah, it's in editing, so it'll be done October of this year.

00:37:14 Nancy

That's exciting.

00:37:15 Bonnie

Yeah.

00:37:18 Nancy

Do you think that you're really able to give this up to them? I mean, I know you have given it up and I know it's going to be but what do you think?

00:37:34 Bonnie

Well, on the record, right. No, it's really hard. Luckily, I had a chance to talk to a few other writers who have also once your book is optioned and it goes to Hollywood, you pretty much lose control. And they all had the same advice. You hand your book over and then you run to the nearest exit and don't look back.

00:37:59 Nancy

To the nearest bar.

00:38:00 Bonnie

Yeah. And when I heard that, I said, well, what if I really wanted to ride it? And my agents very clearly said, you won't have time to do any of that. There's no way. And I said, Why? What will I be doing? I've been on the road for nine months now, so now I know. Yeah.

00:38:19 Nancy

Are you working on something? Are you writing while you're able to do that?

00:38:24 Bonnie

I'm able, in the sense of time, and it's been pretty rough, actually, to find the time, because I need a lot of focus time. This sounds so ridiculous to hear the voices, but that's really true. I really need that time. So it's a little hard because she is quite loud in my head. Right. Some of the characters are still quite loud. Yeah.

00:38:47 Nancy

Will your next book have a dog?

00:38:50 Bonnie

Yes.

00:38:52 Nancy

You know that already?

00:38:53 Bonnie

Well, my agent does not like 6:30. I mean, she says she does now, but she really didn't like 6:30. She's a cat person. It was so funny. I have these two editors and my lovely agent and Todd. It was Lee who actually said, Bonnie, did you know that your team is made up of cat people? No, I did not know that. She told me that after the book was published. So that explains a lot. When I was in Dubai, Felicity was with me, and they decided to have a dog at our event. And you should have seen her. She's like, oh, my God, it was hilarious. But yeah, there's a dog in the next book. I told her it was going to be a thing, and she said, how nice.

00:39:50 Nancy

One of the techniques that you use in the book is flashbacks starting in the present and then taking it back to whatever number of years. Is that the kind of book that you like to read?

00:40:03 Bonnie

I do. I like to get the back story as I go along, as long as I don't lose anybody along the way. I think it's okay to do that. But I do like to find out the roots of things, and I don't like to present them all at once. I just read Rebecca McKay's interview in The New York Times when she said that what she misses is writing, people writing about their work. And I thought, well, here's your book, Rebecca.

00:40:37 Nancy

What do you miss? I mean, what do you like to see in the books you like?

00:40:42 Bonnie

For me, craft is the number one thing. If it's well written, I'll just go with the writer anywhere. And I don't know, I'm really open to a lot of different genres. I'd never read a speculative fiction until Emily St. John Mandel, and then well, it doesn't get much better than that, right? So, yeah, I like to read broadly as much as possible, and I like to read a lot of different countries and other people.

00:41:15 Nancy

So one of the questions that librarians and booksellers are getting, thanks to you, is, oh, I love Lessons in Chemistry. What should I read next?

00:41:26 Bonnie

Well, I know where is Maria Simple? Maria Simple wrote Where'd You Go, Bernadette? And if you have not read this book, of course you have.

00:41:45 Nancy

So Maria's book.

00:41:47 Bonnie

Yes.

00:41:47 Nancy

Any others? I mean, come on, we're dealing with many patrons every day asking us these questions.

00:41:53 Bonnie

Well, I have a new favorite Irish writer, Claire Keegan. It's hard to beat Claire Keegan. Also, if you don't like to read, her books are about 90 pages long. Honestly, she's such a gifted writer. She was nominated for the Booker. I think she should have won. And she's been nominated for the Irish Prize. Her books are absolutely astounding. She writes with so much humanity, and every word is perfect. It's sickening.

00:42:25 Nancy

Oh, and she has the same agent.

00:42:29 Bonnie

Yeah, I know. I say to Felicity, What's Claire working on? Is she done with another book? She goes, yeah, Bonnie, she's done.

00:42:43 Nancy

Why do you think Lessons in Chemistry has been so popular?

00:42:50 Bonnie

That's a really good question. Both Felicity and I really did not expect as she said to me the night before Frankfurt, and I know this for a fact many of my friends books have gone to Frankfurt, and they get rejected by every single publishing house. And Felicity said to me, the world of publishing is weird. That's putting it mildly. And she said, and we like your book, but maybe no one else will. And I said, I'm ready. And then she called me 24 hours later, and she said, Cancel that. So, I don't know. I think it's really I think people respond to Elizabeth Zott because there's her in all of us, at least a little bit of her in all of us, where we wish we could fight back against some injustice, and she just refuses to accept anything. She just goes her own way.

00:43:46 Nancy

And are those the kinds of books because Claire Keegan's characters are not always the strongest.

00:43:53 Bonnie

Yeah.

00:43:54 Nancy

So that's interesting that you like those books.

00:43:58 Bonnie

I do. Well, I think, you know, I just think she's she's just a beautiful writer.

00:44:06 Nancy

She's incredible.

00:44:07 Bonnie

Yeah, she's incredible. But for Elizabeth, she's really a catalyst in the book. She's the one who starts every reaction from people. Anyone who comes in contact with Elizabeth is changed. So that was my idea. That's the chemistry that she has, that much impact on people, and she spreads it on television.

00:44:31 Nancy

So she's like a reagent. Is that what...?

00:44:34 Bonnie

Yeah, exactly. Very good.

00:44:37 Nancy

I learned some lessons in chemistry. Are we going to collect the questions? I've sort of lost track of the time.

00:44:48 Misha

Well, you haven't lost track of time. You've been beautifully talking over here. But just so you all know, we are collecting note cards, so if you still need one, or if you've written a question, if you could raise your hand, staff will come up along the side. But I've got some to get us started, and I'm going to hand them to you. Nancy, some good questions in here.

00:45:08 Nancy

We love getting those questions, too. Here's a nice question. Okay. Even though this is an amusing book, did you feel it emotionally difficult to write?

00:45:26 Bonnie

Oh, yeah. I mean, the dark parts are pretty dark to write. They're really hard to write. And I probably worked harder on those sections than any other sections, actually. I tried to work hard throughout, but those sections are always the hardest to write.

00:45:45 Nancy

I was at a writers workshop with somebody who came into dinner and said, this was at Hedgebrook, because I know that. And she said, I just killed off this character in a mountain climbing accident. I don't think I can write anymore these two weeks that I'm here. Yeah. And then she just rode the bus back and forth. So did you feel, I imagine, in those emotionally.

00:46:14 Bonnie

Well, I didn't wait two weeks. I grieved for about an hour, and then I went, let's move on.

00:46:23 Nancy

Did you set out to write a book about women's empowerment? But you did or the writing process didn't take you there. It helped you explore it. Right?

00:46:35 Bonnie

Yeah. This book was written during my mom's era, when my mom was a mom, and I never really had a chance to look back and think about what all those women's lives were like, really, what they'd given up to raise all of us kids. You hear about it occasionally from them, but my mom's generation, they were always called average housewives, and my mom was not average.

00:47:12 Nancy

Did you feel when you were growing up that your mom wanted to do other things but couldn't?

00:47:18 Bonnie

Well, yeah, she'd been a nurse, and honestly, I think she wanted to be a surgeon, and she would have been an incredible surgeon, but she told me when I was young that girls couldn't be doctors because we weren't smart enough. I know. Well, that's the way she was raised. Right. But my mom clearly really didn't believe that, because as soon as we were all grown up and we left home, my mom went back to school and got her nursing license renewed. She went back to work immediately, full time. And I was really proud of her because my mom went back to work in the 80s when a disease called AIDS had just been discovered, and my mom was the only nurse to volunteer to be on that floor. And I went to pick her up from work one night, and I couldn't find her, and I roamed the hallways. There were never any visitors on the AIDS wards. I finally found my mom sitting beside this young man who was covered in sores, and there were other men in the room, in their beds, and they were all not doing very well, and she was reading out loud to them. And I was standing there, and the guy whose hand she was holding, he said, I know she's your mom, but she's our mom, too. And I was really proud of her. And also she won Nurse of the Year. My mom was really smart, and I think she talked about nursing with such passion, and she always wanted to go back, and she did.

00:48:51 Nancy

Were you surprised when you were writing the book that Walter and Elizabeth didn't get together, or did you know right from the get go?

00:49:02 Bonnie

I knew they were not going to do no.

00:49:05 Nancy

Why not?

00:49:07 Bonnie

Why not? (laughs)

00:49:08 Nancy

Why not? She's not her test...

00:49:11 Bonnie

After Calvin Evans. Would she settle for Walter Pine? I don't know. I just don't see it.

00:49:19 Nancy

Yeah. I don't know if you heard me say no chemistry. I didn't think you did, because you didn't laugh, and so I wanted to make sure that you I didn't hear that. (laughter)

00:49:38 Nancy

Did you have chapters that didn't appear in the finished book?

00:49:41 Bonnie

Yeah, real mad about that. No, I'm not really mad about that. I'm just slightly still pissed about that. I had one chapter that I thought was super important in the book. Elizabeth Zott has first has impact on a local level, then on a national level, the missing chapter, international level. She tells off Khrushchev on TV, and I thought it was a barn burner of a chapter, and my agent said, but it's so political. And I said, the whole book is political anyway, so that's not in it. Hollywood read it, and they were going to put it in the series, but then we'd already committed to eight episodes. We couldn't finish it. And then I have another chapter that actually Barnes and Noble printed in their special edition in the back, and that's about 6:30. It's called 6:30 in the Morning. And when 6:30 discovers that they're pregnant well, he's not pregnant, but he decides that because he's not sure Elizabeth is up to being a parent, that he has to figure it out on his own, so he goes to a park to watch the mothers.

00:50:56 Nancy

And did you write that chapter when you were working on the Booker?

00:51:00 Bonnie

Yeah, it was part of the book. And why didn't they include it? Because I worked with cat people. (laughter)

00:51:18 Nancy

Like, maybe switch.

00:51:22 Bonnie

Yeah. Anyway.

00:51:24 Nancy

So that was I mean, they said, forget this chapter.

00:51:27 Bonnie

Yeah, they wanted to take on another chapter, but I battled to have it in, and it's in there, and that's when there's a bomb, and that one is in there. But no, this one chapter has gotten more comments

from readers than any other chapter in the book from 180,000 Barnes and Nobles readers who have that chapter. Also, it's in Germany, so it's in German as well. Yeah.

00:51:53 Nancy

Wow. And so what are the kinds of questions that people ask you? You know, like, when you're doing a program like this without somebody like me interviewing you and you're just meeting the readers, what do they want to know?

00:52:10 Bonnie

Basically what we've talked about tonight. They want to know where the characters came from and what I like to cook. Nothing. Yeah. It's really interesting, though, to hear what people mostly I hear from a lot of people through direct messages or emails about their experience, especially young women in STEM that their experiences have not changed. Have not changed. It's 2023.

00:52:38 Nancy

Right? Right. Do you read your reviews on Good Reads?

00:52:42 Bonnie

No. No. Never. No.

00:52:45 Nancy

Right. Why do you think people do?

00:52:48 Bonnie

I mean, why would you put yourself through that? Yeah, it's sadomasochism. I just can't, and I think most authors don't. Everybody's entitled to their opinion. It's great. But let's face it, there are a lot of bots on Goodreads, and you don't really know. Some of the bots are good bots, and some of the bots are bad bots, but they're Bots, so it's not even a real opinion. So yeah, I don't read them.

00:53:18 Nancy

Can you talk about your new book, the one you're working on?

00:53:22 Bonnie

No.

00:53:22 Nancy

Somehow I had a feeling that was...

00:53:24 Bonnie

Yeah, no, I can't, because I talked about it a couple of months ago on a program, and then I changed the whole book and now that woman and it was on television, now they're all going to think I'm a liar because none of that is in the book. So now I just stop.

00:53:41 Nancy

Yeah. Here's an interesting question. Going back to the Apple TV, the series, what are you most worried about?

00:53:51 Bonnie

The rowing. Yeah. No, I was kidding. Not really, though. Not really. Brie Larson posted herself erging on Instagram and it was so bad. I was so mortified that I immediately called the other executive producers and I said, Remember when you promised me you'd hire a coach? And they went, she's doing pretty good. And I said, Today, hire a coach today. And they did. And then she called me and she said, I hate you because erging sucks.

00:54:37 Nancy

She should have known that from reading the book, because you say that directly.

00:54:41 Bonnie

Oh, you're doing it correctly now,

00:54:46 Nancy

Besides the rowing, anything else? I mean, do you think she's going to capture Elizabeth?

00:54:50 Bonnie

Oh, she's an incredible actress. When she called me up to talk about Elizabeth Zott, she had so much passion for the character. She'd read the book well before it was published, and she said, Look, I want to be Elizabeth Zott. At the end of the phone call, she said, Bonnie, may I be Elizabeth? And I felt like we were getting married, so I said, I do.

00:55:15 Nancy

When you were working and writing at the same time, how did you make the transition to get into the kind of flow state of creation, a different kind than writing speeches or other things that you were doing?

00:55:36 Bonnie

Well, first I do the spelling bee, and then I read over what I did the day before and I rewrite the whole thing, and then I start again. And then if I work it a little bit, then I can hear the voices. And if I get stuck, then I try to bring in a conflict of some kind. I sort of see you having a list of possible conflicts. Well, you know, work really was inspiration for conflict.

00:56:09 Nancy

Right. But was that the hardest part for you, was making that transition the writing part of the day, the work part of the day?

00:56:20 Bonnie

Yeah, it was. I think if you're a copywriter, there's so many novelists who are copywriters. If you write all day and then you are supposed to write at night, it doesn't go real well. And that's why I switched morning. So whatever they got in the afternoon was what they got.

00:56:40 Nancy

Do you want to tell us what you were working on during that period?

00:56:43 Bonnie

No, I don't. I'm still under 1000. NDAs

00:56:52 Nancy

At what stage did you know people are always interested in this. How did you find your agent and then what was the process and what happened then?

00:57:06 Bonnie

Well, I'd written another book that no one wanted. No agent would touch it, no agent would read. It was only 700 pages long. They thought it was a really bad idea. And it turns out they're right, because the economy of publishing is you don't write a 700 page novel as a debut author. And once it hits Germany, it gains about 25% in weight. So the Germans, when they heard I had a 700 page novel, they went, oh, but anyway, I got 98 rejections on that. It was the last rejection that was the most helpful and the most heinous, because that agent actually read. She was the only one who read something and she said, wow, I really like this voice. I really like what you've done, but I'm not going to sign you because you're a very foolish writer. You wrote 700 pages. Waste of time. I have a voodoo doll that I anyway, but so when I was finishing getting to the end of Lessons in Chemistry, it was really dragging my feet because I didn't want to finish it, because I didn't want to query again. Querying is awful. Now that I know agents really well, their jobs are also awful. They get about 100,000 queries a year and they might take on one writer, so it's pretty rough on them, too. I got lucky. My daughter, when I moved to London, I didn't know anyone, and one of my kids sent me a link to Curtis Brown and the course is called Write to the End of Your Novel. She seemed to think this would inspire me to write to the end of mine. It did not. But I took the course and it was really just to kind of I don't know, it needed something writing wise to do to get me back into this book. And that really helped. It was just a really short online course. Anyone could take it. But then those people said, hey, you should take our in person course in London. It's one night a week for three months. And I got into that course, and it was my way of meeting other writers. And it was really great because I really love those other writers I met. There were 14 of us, but at the end of the course, they throw a little cocktail party and everyone is like, I'm going to meet agents, and Curtis Brown has 60 agents. I'm going to meet somebody. Well, like two or three come to the cocktail party because they're like, oh, great writers. Oh, great. You're going to pitch me your story. But Felicity Blunt was there that night and she walked in and she had everyone's name tag and she was calling out people's names and she called out my name. And then I stood up and she put all the name tags down and she led me out of the room and I thought I was in trouble. I think I paid for the course. Felicity has a lot of thrillers on her list, so I was pretty sure she had me mixed up with someone else. But she started

saying, I love your book. I'm really interested in your book. And I was certain she had me mixed up with someone else. So I just waited, and I was going, uhuh

01:00:21 Bonnie

and I was certain she was going to say, and then when the murderer does, you know anyway, finally she said, you know, Elizabeth Zott? And I said, oh, you meant you actually met me. Yeah. And so she said, I you know, I want you to finish your book. When are you going to be done? And I said, I'll be done in I made this up. I'll be done in June. It was February. But then she called me in April and she said, there's a lot of interest in your book. I'm going to sign you right now without reading it. And I said, okay. And I guess the great part about this story is that when she told me that and I went to her office, I was just literally shaking. I was so happy to be signed by Felicity Blunt. That when I left her office and I was walking to the tube, I must have been nervously grasping at my phone. I ended up calling emergency services by accident, and I didn't know, and I ignored it. And then my phone started ringing and I answered it, and it was Emergency services, London. And they said, Ma'am, are you all right? We've got an emergency call from you. And I said, I got an agent. And they said, yeah, that's great, but that's not an emergency. Oh, yes, it is.

01:01:45 Nancy

Nice. Good. Did you have a say in the cover of the book?

01:01:53 Bonnie

The controversial cover?

01:01:55 Nancy

Is it a controversial cover?

01:01:57 Bonnie

Yeah.

01:01:57 Nancy

Talk about that.

01:01:59 Bonnie

Well, every country gets to do their own cover. I have 40 different covers out there. And it's really interesting because people really know their own territories. They feel like they do, they know their own audiences. And so a lot of covers are based on the UK cover, but they've been modified in some way. But some countries just go, we're doing our own thing. They're supposed to run it by me. Some countries did not. And then we go, what the hell is that? Which just happened recently. But with the United States, they had run some covers by me, and I really, really liked the second cover, but there was something going on with the illustrator and they decided not to use it. We were running out of time. And they presented this cover, and I remember saying to my editor, I think it looks too much like chicklet. I don't have anything against chicklet or romance, but this book is not chicklet and it is not romance. So, unfortunately, all the chicklet and romance readers are really mad because it is not

chiclet, and they bought it. So they're not really mad, just somewhat mad, because you don't kill people off in a romance book, right? It's going to end happily it's going to have a different cover for the paperback, which I'm really looking forward to.

01:03:34 Nancy

Nice. Yeah. What does the British cover look like?

01:03:38 Bonnie

I wish we had a copy. You can see it on my website. It is a woman holding a television. She's standing in a very defiant pose. You only see her from the waist down and she looks very strong. The hilarious thing was they were really influenced by Mad Men and they said, that must be your favorite show. And I said, I've never seen it because as a copywriter, I didn't want to watch work at home, so I've never seen it. Yeah,

01:04:14 Nancy

I know. Elizabeth, you still hear her in your head and everything, but do you think about where she is now?

01:04:21 Bonnie

Yeah, I do. I mean, I sometimes hear her like she's saying, you're really going to do that? Or, you're really not going to do that? You're really not going to say what you should say. Yeah, she's a little scary sometimes, but no, I love having her in my head. She's really kind of changed. Me, too. Made you more able to yeah, I think she's very resilient. I based her on Marcus Aurelia's version of Stoic. Of Stoicism. So she's obviously an atheist, but she is also into self responsibility and rationality. So that's really where she came from. Is that kind of reading? Was it hard for her to fall in love the first time? Yeah, I think so. But what I really loved about Calvin was that he fell in love with her for her mind, and he recognized immediately that she was every bit as smart as he was. Actually, he says at one point, she's smarter than I am. He's getting all the awards, he has all the attention. He realizes she has been sold down the river. And so of course she would fall in love with that. So somebody in the audience wants to know whether she's ever going to fall in love with somebody else again. You know what? I get to ask that a lot. It's so funny how people go. I thought she was going to go for WAKELY. Or what about Walter? Oh, Walter's already taken. The whole point was this woman can stand on her own. And she knew her first love was going to be science. She could not marry Calvin because all of her work would have been under his name, as if he had done it, no matter what he would have said. In her defense, it would have been assumed. And so, no, she can stand on her own. It was interesting in the book where she says, would you change your name to my name? Yeah. He's like hell. No. Right? Like, what? And I hate to interrupt because this conversation is so wonderful, but maybe one or two questions so that all these lovely people can get their books purchased and sure, okay.

01:06:46 Nancy

So let's talk about point of view. And how you decided on how you decided on different points of view, and especially how you chose to do 630s POV, as we say.

01:07:02 Bonnie

Well, I wrote ten points of view. Every writing book will say, don't do that, and they'll also say, especially don't do it on the same page in the same paragraph. But you can you can break these rules. It's like, not the world's not going to end if you break a writing rule. But I really wanted Ten voices to fill her in so we could really see it makes her round. Everybody who comes in contact with her has a reaction to her. It could be very negative, it could be very positive. But that's really what I wanted. As for 6:30, he just started speaking one day and I thought, oh, I'm in trouble. And my agent agreed, but then I kept I kept at it because I really I thought, he is the anthropologist of the book. He's the wise woman in the book. People think Matt is wise. Well, she got it from 6:30. They've been communicating for a long time.

01:07:58 Nancy

Yeah. Right. So, last question, I guess. Have you read Octavia Butler?

01:08:05 Bonnie

Yes.

01:08:06 Nancy

And this person wants to know, has written her idea, the only lasting truth is change, which resonates with the book.

01:08:20 Bonnie

Absolutely. Yeah, I agree with that. I think one thing that I always think about after studying chemistry for so long is that it always astounds me that we're just sitting here and really we're just atoms and molecules, we're just carbon and water. It's amazing, isn't it, that we're just all here, but really, we're just matter. And I think that I kind of wish more people would think about that, in a way, because I think it's really important to remember that we're all exactly the same.

01:08:59 Nancy

Good way to end. All right, Bonnie, thank you so much.

01:09:03 Bonnie

You're welcome.

01:09:05 Nancy

Thank you.

01:09:06 Bonnie

And Nancy, that was really good.

01:09:12 Misha

I think we need another round of applause for Bonnie and Nancy.

01:09:24 Misha

And thank you all again for coming tonight. Literary Seattle is back, so I'm just going to let you know how this is going to go. We're going to have Bonnie and Nancy out in the foyer in front of the security desk in a moment, doing the signing. Just because we need the space in here. We have so many lovely folks. Right, so the book purchasing starts here and will come forward this way. This door is going to open in a minute.