



Library podcast

Nicole Dennis-Benn Discusses “Patsy”

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[00:00:37] My Name is Misha and I'm a Reader Services Librarian here at the Central Library. Thanks again for coming out tonight. We're so pleased to have Nicole Dennis-Benn here for Patsy during both Pride Month and on Juneteenth. Before we begin this event I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. So together let us honor their elders past and present. We thank them for their stewardship of this land. This event is supported by the Seattle Public Library Foundation author series sponsor Gary Kunis and media sponsor The Seattle Times and presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. And now I want to bring up Karen Maeda Allman to do a proper introduction of Nicole Dennis-Benn.

[00:01:29] So good evening. And while one in one week Nicole Dennis-Benn and Ocean Vuong and even a few years ago I don't think I could have even imagined that over the span of two nights we'd be coasting.

[00:01:43] We'd be hosting two queer immigrant writers with two of the best books of the year. And yet here we are.

[00:01:52] Extraordinary. And I'm so excited that this this event will be on the library's podcast for later listening so please share with your friends. Tonight we're honored to co-present Nicole Dennis-Benn now author of two novels. Her debut, Here Comes the Sun was published in 2016 and was a New York Times Notable Book of the year and a winner of the Lambda Literary Award. Here Comes the Sun was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle. John Leonard Award and The New York Times Public Library Young Lions award as well as

the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize. And it was featured as one of the best books of the year by NPR, Entertainment Weekly, Vice and Elliott Bay actually among others. She's here to read from her second novel Patsy. And this book is receiving even higher praise. This is the story of Patsy a young woman who leaves her home in Kingston to make a new life in the U.S. with the woman she has loved for many years. And it's also the story of Patsy's daughter and of course you probably know that things don't exactly turn out quite the way either of them think. And they have to go through quite a bit. Quite a bit both of them on their own before they come to maybe a new place. But it's certainly not the place that they thought they might have come to.

[00:03:18] Patsy has received starred reviews from Kirkus and Booklist and it's been lauded by the New York Times, NPR, Washington Post, Time Magazine and others. NPR in fact said Dennis-Benn is quickly becoming an indispensable novelist and Patsy is a brave brilliant triumph of a book. The National Book Review describes Patsy as exquisitely written highly nuanced and powerful.

[00:03:46] Nicole Dennis-Benn has previously taught in the writing programs at Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, NYU, Sarah Lawrence and elsewhere.

[00:03:54] She's been awarded some amazing fellowships from MacDowell Colony, our local Hedgebrook, Lambda, Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, Hurston/Wright and the Sewanee Writers' Conference. She's also the recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts Artist Grant and the 2018 Caribbean Life Impact Award. So with that please join me in welcoming Nicole Dennis-Benn.

[00:04:23] Thank you. Hi good evening. It was so interesting hearing all that. About Patsy especially really honored to be here.

[00:04:33] So thank you guys for having me. And I see a student Gabriela. Hi how are you. But my first of course she had to suffer because that was my first class I ever taught literally. So glad you're here. All right. So I am going to read from Patsy my second novel. And of course you just heard the descriptions and just you know I can reiterate a little bit. So Patsy is it follows that one woman who leaves her country Jamaica of course Pennyfield where she felt that you know she was trapped trapped as a secretary a working class woman living in this community where she didn't really see herself rising anywhere above that. In addition to that she also had this love with her teenage best friend Cicely who was the one person who really promised Patsy more than what she that would the more than what she had. You know in Cicely she found love and in Cicely she found quote unquote home. And so Cicely was the one

who moved to America and promised Patsy that they could one day be together. So Patsy chases Cicely across the ocean. And finally when she came to America realizing that it's not what Cicely told her it was going to be you know definitely Cicely is married.

[00:05:51] She has moved on clearly. And in addition to that being in America undocumented is not the easiest. I also follow the life of Tru, Patsy's five year old daughter who she left behind in this quest and Tru is good coming of age questioning her mother's abandonment and coming into her own identity not really realizing that Patsy was this unwilling mother you know. You know we exist in a society where you know I'm going to talk more about this in the Q and A. Abortion is illegal in Jamaica. So a lot of mothers motherhood just happened to them and they just have no other choice but to raise their children. But there are women in our society who are like Patsys who have no way out. And so I wanted to really explore a story like that. So I'm just going to read a couple of scenes for you so you can get the gist of these characters and then we'll definitely discuss afterwards.

[00:06:45] In the embassy line Patsy fiddles with the small tiger's eye pendant around her neck. Another gift from Cicely for good luck. Ah bought it in Chinatown. Yes m'dear! Dem 'ave good, good deals. When yuh come we can go together. A liquid-like sensation shoots through Patsy's veins underneath the tweed jacket. Though she's early getting to the embassy, there is still a long line stretched all the way up to Knutsford Boulevard by the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel. The bright June morning is a merriment of blues, greens, and yellows. The sun is already approaching its hottest at 7:00 and the scents of Julie mangoes and crushed worms fill the air. Remnants of last night's shower. A flock of white, triangular birds fly south the way they do when fleeing the call from North America. But Patsy doesn't pay attention to any of this. She clutches the large brown envelope underneath her armpit, where sweat blooms down her sides. Cicely told her to wear a suit. Dey will tek yuh more seriously dis time. But standing in a suit in the hot sun only makes the heat feel worse. There's no way Patsy can take off the blazer since the blouse underneath is soaked by now, hugging her like a wet T-shirt, too scandalous for the gaze of the Americans inside the embassy. Aside from the few women dressed like they're going to church on Easter Sunday in hats and pastel-colored dresses with perspiration visible on their backs.

[00:08:22] Many people like Patsy are dressed formally in business attire. Some of the clothes borrowed, some bought, most too dark and heavy for the mocking heat. Patsy beckons a boy selling frozen bag-juice hoping it will relieve some of the some of the heat and maybe numb her nerves as she thinks of the questions the Americans will ask in the interview. 20 dollah, miss-th. The boy says with a lisp. He's also selling whistles hung with strings around his thumb for people who, though in line to leave the island in droves, might want to join the evening celebration of the Reggae Boyz making it to the 1998 World Cup in France. Everyone in Jamaica is getting ready for the match this evening between Jamaica and Argentina. Nothing

brings Jamaicans together like an international sporting event where they'll be represented. Strangers embrace in Half-Way Tree. Gunmen lay down guns, grab barflies, kiss their proud, laughing mouths, and spin them like battling tops into the street. Young people open kitchen cupboards to fetch Dutch pots and metal spoons to bang with. In Pennyfield, men started making bets as early as last month, digging deep inside shallow pockets at Pete's Bar, where there's a big TV. Miss Maxine, known in the community for her cooked food, is prepared to snatch the fattest foal from her coop to make brown-stew chicken and white rice for the occasion to sell with her special malt-liquor concoction. Good for women wanting to conceive and men desiring energy, especially on a night of predicted victory.

[00:10:03] Patsy pauses and looks at the young hagler with the bag juice and whistles around his thumb a scrawny young man no older than 16 in a mesh marina and a pair of knee-length shorts that don't cover the scars on his legs. Twenty dollah fi one bag juice? She asks him. Yes miss-th. Yuh t'ink people 'ave money like dat 'jus because dem inna embassy line? Patsy asks. The boy doesn't respond knowing his market. Just as he's about to move to the next customer, Patsy says All right, gimme di orange. The boy hands her the juice and takes her money. He swiftly counts it using his free thumb. Patsy watches him impressed as her mind spins and loops around the numbers. She lifts her tongue to the edge of her lips as she too counts in her head. Math was her favorite subject in school the only subject that she excelled in for there is nothing more certain than numbers. When the boy gives her the exact change she tells him to keep it. It is easy to believe each penny will go toward his future. It is easy to believe he has one that he will live out his days not selling juice and whistles but working in someone's bank as a senior accountant or owning one himself. But this moment of optimism lasts no longer than the line stretched around the corner full of people who have discovered that certain seeds the land will not nurture.

[00:11:33] T'ank yuh, miss-th. The boy says slightly bowing his head as though is in resignation. Patsy thinks of all the money she has wasted investing in a passport and an American visa application. She was turned down two years ago with no explanation. People say it's because she doesn't own property in Jamaica. Aside from the seed money she gets from Vincent, the married businessman she sleeps with, there are no real assets she can call sorry. She can tell the American she the Americans she owns. Dey tend to give you a visa if dey know yuh have assets to come back to. Dat way yuh won't run weh fah good, said Ramona, one of the other secretaries in the cubicle next to Patsy's and the only one Patsy eats lunch with. Also, dem tend to be lenient if yuh own yuh own business too, said Sandria the other secretary who tends to butt her nose into people's business then go back to tell their boss Miss Clark - a witch of a woman who scowls at everyone below her rank. Pricked by the hopelessness of her situation, Patsy considers her story one that lacks the drama inherent in say an asylum story which she heard guarantees acceptance anywhere. She read in the Jamaica Observer a few months a few months ago about the man who got chopped up with a

cutlass by four men who found him in a compromising position behind a bush with another man.

[00:13:02] How he hauled himself not to the hospital or police station but to the Canadian Embassy and got a visa on the spot. Dem funny man can mek anyt'ing 'appen. Even part di sea an' walk 'pon wata. All dem haffi do is cry wolf, said Ramona wrinkling her nose and folding the paper. Nonetheless, Patsy practices in her small cubicle at the ministry sitting upright in her swivel chair legs crossed at the ankles facing the blank wooden partition and again last night in her bed lying on her back and staring up at the gaping hole of blackness in her bedroom her daughter snoring softly beside her. I am going to visit a friend. Simple as that. Though she still lacks confidence saying it. She plans to follow it up with her rehearsed story one that would convince them that she has no inclination of running away because how could she? She would tell them that she owns land in Trelawny where she plans to build a house. The land really belonged to Papa Joe Mama G's father and Patsy's grandfather a sugar cane farmer. He was forced to sell it to developers who bought it for chicken feed and turned it into a stadium. Papa Joe died from a broken heart shortly afterward. The embassy officials won't know whether it's Tru. Most times Patsy stops herself mid-practice worrying about being struck by lightning for lying like Mama G always warns. But then again Mama G has warned against other things that Patsy has disobeyed her whole childhood was spent with her mother at church or on street corners handing out Jesus Save flyers and praying for sinners who refused flyers because they were in a hurry to work or school.

[00:14:53] Almost always Patsy would find herself repenting for sins she committed but to lie for an American visa won't be so bad. She reasons since God will understand that it's for the good of her family. She'll go to America and send money home as soon as she finds work. This much is Tru as her daughter's name suggests it's a nickname that has stuck a casual and spontaneous utterance. When Patsy was too exhausted one day. Or was it a whole week? A month? A year? She tends to lose count of these periods too weak from the dark heavy thing she cannot see but knows is always there. Quiet and waiting. Mama G calls it the devil's cold because it has a tendency to creep up like a thief in the middle of the night. How often has Patsy gone through periods where she feels like it's pressing down, down on her chest. There are times when she can barely breathe because of it much less lift the sheet to get out of bed. It was during one such spell that she willed herself to utter her daughter's name Trudy-Ann which she rushed out with an exhaled breath only as Tru. Without pausing to correct herself Patsy let the name carry on since it drew her daughter to her anyway.

[00:16:15] She looked into her child's large brown eyes that day. Her open moon face which is similar to Patsy's lacked the earnestness of a curious toddler when the thing finally lifted and Patsy regained her ability to breathe. She repeated the name. Seeing something take shape in her daughter's eyes. Mama G who whose head remains in the clouds surprisingly caught on to

the name as well since to her. The name sounded like the sort of name that would make the child less sinful. When the little girl began to write her own name she spelled it as Tru. The name her school friends and teachers used the name Pastor Kirby called her when he asked Patsy if she would send her to Sunday school like the rest of the children. She might even learn to be a girl then he pressed only Tru's father refuses to use the name or acknowledge it. Patsy thinks about all this as she sucks on the cold bag juice. Relieved to feel both its cooling and numbing effect. The embassy line begins to move steadily in the shade of the palm trees. Patsy pays more attention to the other people around her wondering about their lies. How creative might they be. Take a man in a dark suit who looks like he's on his way to his own funeral. Like Patsy He clutches his documents in an envelope constantly adjusting the blue tie around his neck with the black calloused fingers of a laborer maybe a farmer.

[00:17:42] What might a man like that say to the American embassy official that he owns many acres of land that he uses it to plant and produce that the produce doesn't remain untouched sitting bruised and overripe in Coronation Market. The only market where things might his things might sell since his country cannot export them. Or maybe he's going away to for a few months maybe a year to farm. Like most Jamaican farmers who have lost the ability to profit from their own land. And then there's a family of four behind him a mother and her three small children. The oldest is a girl who watches her younger siblings as their mother scurries over to a food cart made of bamboo painted black green and yellow like the Jamaican flag peeled Julie mangos and June plums dangle in transparent plastic bags from its awning. The children should be in school. Patsy thinks what might the mother say to the embassy official. Patsy imagines the mother lifting up the two younger children for a smug faced official to see perhaps even handing them over like the bag of June plums to assess their worth. See? See? the mother might say All t'ree assets right 'ere. So that was the beginning of Patsy. Just just to kind of give a brief description of what it takes to get into America.

[00:19:13] I know right now there's a lot of discourse you know with of course from Trump building this interesting wall. But you know many of us immigrants come here by visa. Right. And so like a Patsy or like my father who came to America or overstayed a visiting visa. Right. And that was how they were able to come to this country and you know try to hustle given that they are still marginalized most of them are unable to become upwardly upwardly mobile for obvious reasons. You know not having no social security. So living on the outskirts. So that's really what Patsy came to face when she got here to America realizing that oh my gosh it's not a fantasy after all. Now the second scene I'm about to read to you is a little further on in the book by now Patsy. You know its working as bathroom cleaning lady because she can't get any other jobs right without the right papers. So she's working in this job cleaning up this Jamaican restaurant owned by a white man who visited the island only one time in his life and decides to open up a Jamaican restaurant which happens. So here Patsy is really feeling it right you know. You know she's realizing for the first time well not really for the first time but one of those spells where she's really seeing that America could really kill her. Right. If she's

not really careful. So I don't want to over explain the scene I'm just going to read it and we're going to. Like I said before we'll discuss it in Q and A.

[00:20:40] All right. So this is between Patsy and her roommate Fionna.

[00:20:44] There are two types of devil's cold - one in which you cannot bring yourself to leave the room much less the bed to do the simplest things and the other in which you go through the motions in a constant stupor. Patsy lies in bed turned away from the dark heavy thing that has returned its shadow dimming the room with a cover over her head. She closes her eyes not wanting to see it God knows how long she has gone without eating she could die. She knows though death doesn't seem as scary after all not as scary as the dark thing. Here in America there are no bush teas for it. No bitter mix of Ramgoat roses, rosemary, lemongrass bissy, and other herbs. No pastor to come with a bottle of sanctified olive oil. No neighbor from the country who can wring the neck of a goat and sever it with a machete for you to bathe in its blood. No time to lie down and let it run its course. She's powerless against it. Di real hell is allowing dis place to eat you alive, Fionna says to Patsy when she notices that she has been lying in the same spot on the bed inside their studio from sunup to sundown. How many rotations of the sun has gone through since Patsy climbed in bed that night after seeing Cicely.

[00:22:03] She slips in and out of sleep she wakes to Fionna shaking her. Patsy. Patsy. Patsy. It reminds Patsy of her daughter's voice. How it would pull Patsy from the lips of a deep sleep. Here she is in the midst of it hating it terrified of it and yet her only thought is of Tru. During those years it was the anticipation of going to America to see Cicely that had kept Patsy alive. But what is keeping her alive now? Where will she find a strength that would protect her from this from the spells. How can she live knowing that she lost Cicely to her American dream. It's then that what Fionna had said about not having the luxury of choosing love makes sense to Patsy. That's what it all comes down to choice. When has she ever been given a choice? Never. She was never given a choice to say no the first time her legs were pried open. Never given the choice to rid her body of the grievance she had to carry for nine months. Never given the choice to look at another woman and allow herself to be carried by the feeling without blood. Bright red or glistening glass sticking to her like shadow. And now, now the promise of life comes with accepting the fact that she will never have a choice.

[00:23:26] Come let's go. Fionna says. Ah told Alan you was coming in tonight dat you was running a high fever but dat yuh all right now. Yuh want to get fired. I can't. Patsy tells her. What yuh mean yuh can't? Fionna sits on the bed her weight pressing down on the mattress. She puts her arms around Patsy. You've been like dis for a week. Dis is not a place for you to feel sorry fah yuhself, yuh hear? Ah can't take dis. Can't take what. Come you mus' push

through whatever going on with you. We in this together. I'm sure you didn't come to this country to die.

[00:24:02] There's a difference between wanting to die and not wanting to live. Patsy doubts she can explain this to anyone. She's tired of dealing with a dark thing mocking her as a nameless faceless interloper on foreign soil before it had mocked her as a helpless Secretary trapped inside a cubicle an unwilling mother with no way out but inside her dreams. She cannot afford to go back to that either she wishes to confide this to Fionna but it would be one less hassle if she can make Fionna go away and leave her alone. So when Fionna tugs the sheet from Patsy Patsy delivers the blow. Ah had sex with Alrick. A hush falls inside the room when Fionna steps back. As she glances up at Fionna she sees the vulnerability there in her eyes the exposed vein in her neck all that is preventing Patsy now from pulling the blade with her tongue telling Fionna how Alrick had pressed her up against the wall right there where she stands looking down on her and fucked her good and hard. Is the pity she sees on Fionna's face. Patsy expects her to lash out hit her tell her to leave but she doesn't then quietly shamefully. Patsy says I'm sorry. Fionna only laughs clasping her hands together to cup her mouth. It sounds genuine like that of a woman who has known every secret there is to know. And has pitied the person thinking she could be so naive.

[00:25:32] Patsy stares at her puzzled at the sight of the tearful gratitude her confession has brought to her roommate. The dark cluster breaks and falls apart in her panic. Girl please. Fionna says. Is that why you're down on yourself. That man would screw anything in a dress. That's just how they are especially Caribbean men. Don't you know that? Your Jamaican men especially. So you knew. Patsy asks. No. But I know dick and what it's capable of. And you okay with it? Look here ah judge the penis different from the man. Who he loves and who he fucks are separate. We've been friends for longer than we've been lovers. That's the only thing keeping us together. Comfort. I'm glad you told me. Ah consider you as a friend too. I know this might sound foolish. but his weakness don't make him a bad person. Neither does yours. When you fall in love with your best friend it's different. You accept everything 'bout dem. The Good the Bad and the downright ugly. Sitting down on the bed Fionna strokes Patsy's arm. Maybe you should talk to somebody. Somebody like who? Fionna shrugs. Someone you can confide in someone who can help you like a professional. 'Cause rather than watch you do such a piss poor job at slowly killing yourself. I'd rather kill you myself she jokes. I just Patsy's voice trails. Who hasn't thought about giving up? Fionna asks reading her mind. This place don't make it easy for us. Is like walking 'pon hot coal. At least in sleep we can dream but the weirdest thing about life is that it's only understood backward. You never know what's at the end ah this tunnel waiting for you sweetheart. Now come get dressed. We got life to live and rent to pay. Yes. And so finally.

[00:27:32] I just want to introduce you briefly to Tru Patsy's daughter. And so the book takes place over a period of 10 years. It starts in 1998 and ends in 2008. Right. So by now Tru is 15

16 years all right. And like I said before she's coming into her herself though questionings that's happening with her and so I'm just gonna read a very brief scene exchange between her and her classmates who of course sees her doing something very interesting and we'll talk again.

[00:28:04] Tru prefers to wait until the locker room clears. She doesn't have to wait long because as soon as she enters the girls cover themselves with their towels or whatever they can find their eyes sliding toward her then down. They dress themselves in record speed scurrying out of the locker room giggling freely outside as if they have just narrowly escaped death. Once there is nothing but the sound of water dripping from the shower head Tru hurries up to change out of her uniform and into her soccer gear. She pulls a white polo shirt over her head. She examines herself in the long mirror to make sure there are no bumps on her chest. But she still sees them no matter how tight. She does the bandage. She never feels secure. For good measure she lifts her shirt and undoes the bandage. Slowly releasing her breath before she adjusts it once again. A slight sheen of sweat breaks out on her forehead. She sucks air grits her teeth and pulls bearing the slight pain. She starts to sweat in the heat and her breath pales as a sob compresses her lungs. It comes out as a gasp. Does it take you a while wid dat? Tru freezes at the sound of the voice when she turns Saskia Rawlins is standing behind her. She's already dressed in her netball gear a white polo shirt with the school's name written on it a short pleated blue skirt that shows her knobby kneecaps and long legs with a pair of shiny shinbones and a pair of white sneakers that look extra white next to her brown skin.

[00:29:45] Yuh not flat-chested after all she says to Tru. Taking a few steps toward her. Why yuh not at practice? Tru asks suppressing her heavy breathing and quickly wiping away sweat and the tears of frustration that had fallen down her cheeks. I was late Saskia says. Coach bench me. She knows that Saskia saw her. She waits for the questions written on Saskia's face. Up close. It resembles a rich dark brown cut of velvet Tru looks away. So is it Tru? Saskia asks. Girls are talking all ovah school. Dat is none of their business. She says too quickly. Dat's what I tell dem too Tru grabs her things. I have to go. It's OK. I won't tell. What's there for you to tell? Tru asks slinging her book bag over her one shoulder. Saskia shrugs. It looks painful. Not as painful as having breasts she says I don't know 'bout you but I like breasts. Good for you. Tru says I meant to say... I didn't take it any way. Tru can't help but smile. Wow I never expected to see dat Saskia tells her. What? You smiling. Yuh always so serious. There is nothing much to smile about. Well dat's too bad. The 3:25 freeze bell goes off outside. A call for abrupt silence on campus where all the students teachers and staff are expected to stop what they're doing for a full minute of reflection a tradition adopted from their British founders. Tru is stuck here with Saskia in the quiet which sweeps through the empty locker room.

[00:31:31] She struggles under the blanket of stillness feeling herself falling into a rare spell of shyness fidgeting beneath the merciless hand on the clock and Saskia's knowing gaze. The moment seems to last longer than a minute longer perhaps than anything she ever endured in her whole life. When the bell rings again to end the freeze Saskia is the first to speak. Is someone coming for you afterwards? No. Do you want to walk to di bus stop in Half-Way Tree? You would risk dat? Risk what? They might say you're tainted. Saskia puts her hands on her narrow hips I dare them. Maybe another time. She says smiling. Saskia nods and bites her bottom lip as she digs inside her book bag and fishes a pen. Here opening Tru's palm. She scribbles a number in the middle. Tru's hand shakes a little. Saskia doesn't seem to notice when she's done. She looks up at TRU before she says anything. Her teammates enter the locker room and she discreetly let's go of Tru's hand but her touch echoes all over Tru's skin the Girl's laughter and chatter fill the space. They greet Saskia surrounding her with their babble about how unfair coach was today. Tru uses the opportunity to slip out. All right so that was a final scene I decided to read. And so I guess it's that you know or. OK. All right. So if you guys have any questions I'm open to them.

[00:33:11] Oh thank you thank you. Thank you. Applause.

[00:33:23] Right. So 98 was very important to me because that was actually around the time when I also left Jamaica. And I remember that year very well because I was in high school at the time and the Reggae Boyz. That was a big thing they were in France. It was a World Cup and they were playing and everybody was proud of the Reggae Boyz going it went to France. And so I I remember that feeling of exhilaration the whole country was celebrating but yet feeling the need to leave the way how Patsy felt that need to leave. And so I wanted to really set the create that irony where here the country is celebrating here we're being told rise up you can be great like the Reggae Boyz. But yes so there were no infrastructures in place to help us to rise up to be better to be the best people we can be in that country. So many people were leaving the country in droves including myself and of course in the fiction in the fiction as well. Patsy you know the long long lines and I don't know how many if you're familiar with Kingston Jamaica. OK you are OK. So do you remember the embassy line right. It has since moved is now somewhere else but when it was on by by the Knutsford area. You see the long lines of people lined up and I went to St.

[00:34:35] Andrew High School for Girls. So we'll be walking or driving and you see the droves of people. And that always stood out to me in my mind. So I wanted to set it there in that moment right where that the country was celebrating and that duality but also the 10 year span is also coming into 2008 with about Obama period. Right. And here Patsy's still feeling marginalized still feeling that she's against the wall literally because you know many people actually well you know it's interesting how the book came out in a time of Trump and everything is so relevant to what we're talking about now. No but what a lot of people didn't

realize was undocumented immigrants never had it easy in America no matter what what political which party was in power. And so while I was writing Patsy, I started Patsy in 2012 you know the Obama era. So still writing this woman who is struggling you know trying to make ends meet in Brooklyn New York where she had no papers she didn't have that. I mean she was doing the jobs that no one no one else wanted. And so wanted to make sure that you know kind of follow her life but also have of the historical moments in there just to give you a sense give readers a sense of the time period and the social atmosphere.

[00:36:00] Yeah. Thanks for that question. So the research I did for Patsy's character. I mean it took me going back home for sure I did ask people questions because even though yes I used to pass along lines and embassy line I didn't really know exactly what went on in there because I was fortunate I know my father came here to America undocumented right. So because of him I was able to get my my green card so I didn't I wasn't one of those people who had to stand in those long lines. So I reached out to my mother of course who had to do the same thing. And friends of mine who tell me exactly what would happen in the embassy you know the anxieties that people had. Like the fact that there was no name being names being called for example it's just like you know the person in the in the window would say next and you have to get up and they're hoping that they're in a good mood right. If the Americans weren't in a good mood you're screwed and you could wait for another two years for another interview. Right. So that was the level of anxiety that you know I asked around in terms of the most research I did though character wise was Tru's character because yes you know one of the things that I wanted to know about is how does a gender nonconforming teenager exist in a country where we had to wear uniforms and all our uniforms. You know we had to conform to the gender our genders right. So the girls wore the tunics or the skirts and blouse the boys wear the khaki pants and and shirts. So there was no questions about that. And so it took me reaching out to acquaintances who have now come out as gender nonconforming living on the island some of them are here. And I asked them what was it like for you in high school.

[00:37:43] We had to wear those dresses those tunics and then revealing to me it felt like wearing a costume. And so each morning one person in particular said each morning she felt like she had to take a deep breath and just say you know what it's just an act for the day. I'm going to do it. I want to pull through. And that was it. So that was really something I wanted to get in with Tru's character. In addition to wrapping her breasts I wasn't really familiar with that the binding of her breast. So again you know talking to other friends of mine in Brooklyn who are who are butch or also trans men and what they went through as teenagers binding their breasts before doing top surgery later on in life. So that was really the the the extent of the research I did primarily for Patsy.

[00:38:37] What made me decide to become a writer. Oh all right. So that one. So I always wanted to tell stories. You know I grew up in Jamaica and I never saw stories about me written

by people who look like me who sounded like me. So I really wanted to tell my stories. I didn't know how to do that stuff cause like any little girl growing up on an island where you're reading books with white people with blond hair and blue eyes. My characters had white white sorry were white with blond hair and blue eyes. Right.

[00:39:03] So I there was something there by I just didn't know how exactly to tap into the people around me tell our stories or untold stories. So it wasn't until coming like going to school here you know I started reading James Baldwin. Alice Walker Audre Lorde. And just being fascinated that these individuals also how can I forget. Toni Morrison fascinated by these stories and how they tell stories of what about the people around them and how they look like me you know I was blown when Audre Lorde for example another Caribbean another person of Caribbean ancestry you know was so open with her sexuality. I never saw a black woman who was that open with her sexuality because even when I came to America and that came out as a lesbian in college I was more surrounded by white lesbians because the black girls on campus were afraid to come out. You know there were Deltas AKAs they were very into their own cliques and so if they got outed it was that that was that was the end for them. So I mostly hung out with white lesbians and so for me and encountering Audre Lorde on the page and knowing that oh my gosh I can come out like that in addition to that I can also write my truths you know her faith her line was our silences can't protect us. I clung to that and that was really what got me writing even more.

[00:40:24] And then fast forward to meeting my wife who saw that I was doing it more than public health research which I did. That was my past life saying to me you know what you should look into writing programs. And I did that and never looked back since. So that's it. And my third book I don't want to disclose what it's about now but it's also said it's set in Jamaica and also parts in Brooklyn New York as well. So I moved to Hempstead New York. Anybody familiar with Long Island any Long Islands here. So I went to Hempstead New York that's where my father lived. And so I came to live with him for the year when I was here for the period of. Like that. I call it the assimilation process. And that's really what he wanted. He thought it was too much for me to come and go all the way go away to school. So he wanted me there with him being raised and seeing like being told what America is like you know oh, Nicole always be polite you know keep your head down work hard. Those little things you know he'll tell me on his drives because he's a driver and we used to drive around in his taxis. And he'd tell me everything I needed to know about America. But for me I really felt there was something more that I wanted. I did not want to stay in Long Island.

[00:41:38] I did not want to attend Hofstra. You know I wanted to go somewhere farther because even though yes I was in America I felt like yes it was if I was around the corner from where my father lived. I couldn't I couldn't be the free person I wanted to be. So I wanted to be five hours away. So I went to Cornell and that was where I found that freedom but at the same

time you know feeling still homesick and sorry. Does that answer your question again. It was my homesickness that kept me writing. I wrote poetry bad poetry but it was writing. And then I went to grad school in Michigan and in Michigan decided that you know what I want to come back to New York City. In fact I want to live in the City and Brooklyn was the next best thing because it was affordable. It was still New York City. And that was where I found my grounding as an artist or a wannabe artist because I was working in public health but not really knowing how to come out as a writer. You know I didn't have the avenues just yet but being around other artists in Brooklyn was what inspired me. So in Patsy you know I wrote what I knew in terms of that community the Crown Heights community which I discovered which is more more Caribbean Mecca and East Flatbush Avenue.

[00:42:49] So that's what that was reason.

[00:42:58] You know I never got this question. Thank you for that question. That's a very good question by the way. No. As a writer tapping into these these issues yes there are things that come up there for example. In Here Comes the Sun. I call it a purging. I really had to write. Here Comes the Sun to even write Patsy you know.

[00:43:18] And those of you who are not familiar with Here Comes the Sun. It is about three women living on the outskirts of Montego Bay who is told is about to be taken over by a huge hotel resort. And the book itself taps into identities sexuality race class displacement. But I also tackle the issue of rape incest. All these different dark issues dark in quotation marks that I tackle especially the sexualization of four young girls in Jamaica.

[00:43:46] So while writing that book it was really a kind of I call it my angry book in that. There were things in that book that I was questioning because even though I love my country you know I call it my love letter to Jamaica because I resent why I had to leave in the first place. So though the disparities among the different classes for example also the fact that feeling like I couldn't come out if I wanted to come out as a lesbian there are all these different things and also the fact that people are more likely to accept a pedophile into the community than somebody who is known as a gay or lesbian person.

[00:44:25] And that kind of anger while I was writing it it kind of felt cathartic while I wrote that while I was like purging it was really cathartic writing. Here Comes the Sun. Now with Patsy was a kind of a different experience in that I found myself getting angry while writing Tru's character and I didn't realize how angry I was because I was at Tru's character came to me when I was at Hedgebrook actually which is not too far from here right. I was at Hedgebrook and I realized I was writing this character who seemed like it was Patsy's daughter but the

voice was a very angry tone. And I was like Why am I. Why why is it that every time I'm writing that character my physically shaking writing Tru's character and thanks to good therapy because I do go to therapy and my therapist said to me who is Tru to you. And you know it took me really because I never really realized how much I I absorbed growing up without my father being there. My father left for America when I was three and one of the things that I remember saying to myself or being told by community members was I ought to be grateful like all you know he's in America.

[00:45:35] And I said things for you. The barrels the gifts all these things and there are a lot of children in Jamaica like myself. They call them the Barrel children. Right we're told. Oh yeah. Be happy. The parents is going away for the good of the family right. And so you grew up with a sense of Yeah you know you're you're your bit you're able to afford school you're able to get the gifts but something was missing. And so Tru that in Tru's character though she did not hear from her mother in a good 10 year. She was basically abandoned. And somehow those feelings got mixed in. And that was really what I was dealing with. So it was really talking to somebody who was great to talk to and it helped me it helped me actually unpack my character and I even suggested this to any artists or any writer. It's good to have therapy because really peeling back layers with your own life you could be you actually be surprised how much it helps you with your characters as well.

[00:46:29] And so that was really how I was able to protect myself while writing that book. Yeah. So after coming out from Patsy it was more like now having more of a self more self awareness. I feel like.

[00:46:49] All right now who. Who's writing the books I wish I could have read when I was younger. That's a good question. I think Sarah M. Broom. She's the author of The Yellow House which is coming out in August.

[00:47:00] I had the pleasure of reading a galley and I really enjoyed that book and I think she's one of those people who to me it feels like she's writing a book I'd love to.

[00:47:08] I would have loved to read when I was growing up. I would also say Edwidge Danticat because I never knew of Edwidge Danticat growing up. I discovered discovered Edwidge Danticat when I came here when I actually moved to Brooklyn actually. And so if I had known who who Edwidge was and seeing her writing I think I would have felt a little secure Jamaica Kincaid the same thing. Paul Marshall Zora Neale Hurston and it's so embarrassing to even call these women's names knowing that yeah they're acclaimed authors they're not new right. But the fact that you know here was coming from a black country where I was not taught

these people you know and it was mostly white British men. And so if it had we been assigned books by those authors I feel like there would be some sense of like oh yes I can do this or Yes I exist in literature as well. And so for me and now as a writer I'm writing these books hoping that the next young girl in Jamaica could pick it up you know maybe she might discover it because I won't fool myself into thinking that Jamaican high schools would teach my books given that you know there's a lesbian components in there. I was actually basically told in an interview on Smile Jamaica that my book is too controversial you know because of that even though it was tackling things that the country is dealing with with when.

[00:48:27] When it comes down to the sexualization for young girls all these different issues of classism colorism all these things they focused on Margo and Here Comes the Sun being the lesbian and of course maybe now maybe Patsy. But let's see because I was surprised that the Jamaica Observer on Sunday gave me a great review of Patsy so that's I mean knock on hard wood that's the beginning of change who knows. Yeah. So that was something I wrote about last year and Who's Allowed to Hold Hands? in the New York Times. It was an essay. You know my wife is American. She's black American and one of the things we realize is that when we do hold hands as wife and wife walking on the street could be Fulton Street. It could be Flatbush it could be anywhere. As two black women loving each other we get stares in America. And you know some men would dare say these things to us. You know there are the people would say Oh honey can we get in between thinking that being a lesbian is just a plaything. And then there are the other men who would actually really verbally like say things to us like threats right. And that was that would be when I say to them Well we're in America.

[00:49:44] This is legal. Leave us alone. So that incident that I wrote to both in the Times was it was an exchange with another Jamaican man in the in the neighborhood and that the American people around all the people in the neighborhood that never came to our rescue. They just watched everything happen. And so to me it kind of I always say to myself you know what. I'm not really free. As a lesbian anywhere. You know I feel like inside this black female body I'm never free. You know so for me it's important for me to find a freedom within myself right because I won't you know yes I came to America for that freedom but it's the same as in Jamaica. The only difference is that there are laws here protecting us right. But you know we have to just pray and hope that hopefully somebody is not going to slip and do something you know when they're not looking you know. But we have to be careful still as black lesbians. Yeah good question. I was writing on Patsy. Oh and by the way you're my student at the time I was writing Patsy in 2012 I started Patsy and Here Comes the Sun was probably two years in the I started.

[00:50:57] Here Comes the Sun in 2010. So Here Comes the Sun. It kind of took over that Margot Thandie Dolores just kept on coming and so I put Patsy aside and just went with Here Comes the Sun and my agent sold the book and by the time she sold the book it had gathered

so much fanfare that I literally had to of course support that completely. But Patsy kept calling me because in my quiet times I would actually go back and reread revise and somehow the other characters in Patsy. Also as this started coming about they just started speaking in quotations. So what I did I took the time out to go to Hedgebrook. I went to Hedgebrook because I wanted that time that quiet quiet space where I could actually work on Patsy and this was actually while Here Comes the Sun was in production. So what I did I actually wrote drafts liket many drafts of Patsy different chapters and that could actually carry me through a little nice tour so I couldn't carry the manuscript with me while promoting. Here comes the Sun. So yeah it was like I was kind of juggling two babies at the same time. And by the time Here Comes the Sun became a paperback. Patsy was now in production.

[00:52:12] So yes it was definitely a very interesting dynamic.

[00:52:24] Oh yeah I might. Definitely. You know cause for me it's important to tell the untold stories and that's basically what you just brought up those untold stories. You know one of the things and even as you were talking I remembered when I first came out in Jamaica. You know so well when I came to college here it was then that I discover that Jamaica had lesbians. I didn't know that. Like what. Really. Where were you guys. You know and I discovered them online. And these women who I discovered online were the lawyers where the doctors were the actresses and all these people who were in a secret society. They were all married with children. And you know but we had great conversations we had meet ups. We had like all like all these different. We call it picnics all these different things that we do. And nobody would know it was a bunch of lesbian women doing this you know because we carry it well. While in Jamaica we carried ourselves a certain way. Oh really. OK well we'll have to talk afterwards. But yeah and some of them are very quiet about it. You know there. There was one. You know it was so sad because you know we had these parties in the hills right where

[00:53:33] You had to literally get a text message to know where it's at. Because nobody else can know. And I do remember one person her husband finding out and driving up that hill with an SUV very angry and it was a scene that just unraveled in front of me and that was something that I was so terrified that I did not go back to any of those parties just because of me. If he could find out then can you imagine then who else and there was something sad about it. This whole secrecy off it. And I was actually privileged that I could go back to New York and go back on campus and be free as a lesbian. They had to go back home to their husbands their children. Right. And so that was a sad part because I knew that yes I loved their company but there was something depressing about it so one day I might end up writing about that. But for me right now with Patsy I wanted to tackle Patsy who the same thing happened where she is also was also forced into that right. She had the child you know no one in her community knew how she felt but for her feeling that she had to go away to express her true self.

[00:54:40] You know with a woman who she chose her and you know you brought up colorism in the beginning you know Cicely is her light skinned blue eyed friend. And for Patsy those of you who are familiar with Caribbean or even growing up in predominantly black countries you know how important it was to have that light skinned friend you know with the long hair who you can play with and is a part of how much hatred we internalize of our own selves and so will our Patsy latching onto our Cicely. It's actually more than that sexual or platonic friendship. It's actually her latching onto the idea of Cicely wanting very much to be a Cicely to be inside her skin. So for her it was important to her like the way her mother latched onto Jesus to save her. Patsy is looking to Cicely as her Savior. And so I wanted to play around with that complexity as well. In the book but I am really interested in writing more about sexuality and classism and colorism definitely on our island because I know other Caribbean islands deal with it as well. And when I have book readings in Nigeria and South Africa the same thing you know its diaspora wherever we are.

[00:56:02] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.