

>> This is Matt Raymond [assumed spelling] at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. Co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now in its ninth year, this free event held Saturday, September 26 on the National Mall in Washington D.C. will spark reader's passion for learning as they interact with the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person, you can still participate online. These podcasts with well-known authors are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest along with several other materials. I now have the pleasure of talking with the famed children's author, Lois Lowry. Ms. Lowry has written more than 20 books for young readers, tackling a number of serious topics including adoption, mental illness, cancer and the Holocaust. Her many citations and award include two Newbery Medals for her novels *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*. Ms. Lowry's first picture book, *Crow Call* debuts in October. It tells a story of nine-year-old Liz as she becomes reacquainted with her long absent father who returns from fighting in World War II. Ms. Lowry, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Oh, thank you, pleasure to be with you.

>> Now, I know that you began your career as a photographer, what motivated you to sort of switch gears, as you might say, and do you see any parallels between those two careers?

>> Yeah, there are. And I didn't really begin as a photographer. I added that onto my professional careers and [inaudible]. I was already writing, but I studied photography in graduate school and I discovered when I was a journalist that I could do the photographs to accompany articles that I was writing. And I loved photography. And so I set up a dark room -- I mean this is so long ago that people used dark rooms, which are no longer in use anymore. And I did both of those things for -- for quite a long while.

>> Now, you said that your books seem to center around one general theme and that's the importance of human connections. Why do you like to focus on this idea and how do you keep your stories fresh and new while at the same time, not straying from this theme?

>> Oh golly, that's a big question. I think all literature really, is about human connections. I have one book actually, which is about a dog and there are no humans in it except peripheral to the dog. So I suppose it doesn't [inaudible], but -- but literature is always about the way people connect to each other and fail to connect. That's what makes literature interesting, the failures I think. And the groping. And so I think all of my -- my books, whatever form they've taken and whatever period they're in because some of them go back to, you know, other periods in history -- that's what they're about. They're about people and how we -- how we try to be the best we can for one another and how we often fail at it.

>> Now I mentioned a number of the issues that some of your books deal with, in particular many very serious issues like racism, the Holocaust and terminal illness. For a young adult audience, how do you balance that message and -- and the tone for that particular audience of readers?

>> Yeah, I kind of cringed when you read that list. It sounded so grim [laughter]. But actually, what I do is to try to write about life and the things that life entails. And -- and some of those things are very grim. And I suppose somewhere someone picked out a number of topics that I've addressed and that was the list you read. But I would like to add [inaudible] written about the opposite end of the spectrum as well. Because that's what all our lives consist of, going from one thing to the next, making our way through one terrible event to come out the other side. And nobody's exempt from that. And -- and kids need to know that literature the way that young people rehearse for real life and by reading a book about things that perhaps they haven't experienced yet, they get to think about how they will or how they would when the time comes dealing with such issues. And so, I don't -- I don't think it's a -- it's as grim as it sounds to deal with such issues for kids. My books incidentally all have -- I would like to think all have happy endings. Some of the [inaudible] are ambiguous, but I think they all deal with -- with coming out the other side of things.

>> If we can talk about your most recent book. Now tell me a little bit about Crow Call .

>> Yeah, it has a long history because it's autobiographical and I have a long history. I'm 72 years old and that book is about me, though I changed my name. Back at the end of World War II, my father was a career Army officer. So, he went off to the Pacific at the beginning of the war and we missed him. It was a big hole in our lives. I had a mother, a baby brother and a slightly older sister. And then he returned after a very long absence and I knew that I loved him and I knew that I had missed him, but I was completely scared to death of him because he was an absolute stranger to me. And so, there was this -- I had a memory of this one particular day, in which my father took me alone -- no sister, no brother along, no mom -- just the two of us out for the day. And that's what that story is about. And I actually wrote this story way back in about probably 1975. And it was published as a story for adults in a magazine. So it had been out there a long time and I had often referred to it when speaking to audiences because when they ask me how I got started writing for kids, it was because a children's book editor had read that story and contacted me and asked me to write a book for young people. So it had been out there all that time, the years passed, I began to write many books for young people. You said more than 20, actually Crow Call is I think 35 [inaudible].

>> Goodness, goodness, we'll have to update our stats.

>> So, a couple of years ago, an editor at Scholastic came to me having heard me tell the story of that story and its origins. And she said, "Could we take a look at it, it sounds like it might be publishable as a story for young people?" And in fact, she decided as a picture book. So, she asked me to make a very few changes, which I did and then she found

exactly the write illustrator. He and I have never met, but he did have a photograph of me as a little girl. And that's what he used for the illustrations. He emailed me at one point because in the book, the little girl is wearing a plaid shirt and it's described in the story. And it was a real shirt and the photograph I gave him was of me wearing that shirt. But the photograph of course, was in black and white. It was from the early 1940's. And so, he emailed me and asked me to describe the colors in the shirt. It's very hard to describe the colors in a plaid because as they cross one another they form new colors. But I tried to describe it and he did such a wonderful job, so when I -- when I look at the picture -- the book isn't out yet, but they have sent me an early copy. And when I look at those pictures, there I am and there's my shirt. The funny thing is, nobody ever asked me for a picture of my father, so the father in the book doesn't look at all like mine, but that's okay.

>> Well aside from that, I have seen very, very beautiful illustrations - - Bagram Ibatoulline is your illustrator. Do you think overall that his art was able to really capture your message?

>> It certainly does for me, it's very hard to know what other people, you know, what their response will be because reading is such a solitary act and a relationship between a reader and a book is such an intimate [inaudible], and individual one. But to me, remember the child I was, remembering the time that was, the place that was -- it's all right there in his pictures, kind of in a magical way. I want to add something else though. It seems to me that the story itself, though it was my story and my story about reconnecting to my father who was a stranger returning from a war could be any child's story. And that seems kind of sad because it could be not World War II, it could've been Korea or Vietnam or a child whose father returns from Iraq because always there have been fathers who have been gone at war time. So that's a kind of sad, but -- but every present event in the lives of children.

>> Are there any lessons that you learned from your father that you still take with you today?

>> Oh gosh, I suppose we all -- we all have things we take with us from our parents. I -- if you would have asked me that before I was on the phone, I'd -- I'd be able to think of an answer, but --

>> Oh, okay.

>> -- right to my -- right to my memory, but my father was a good and kind and gentle man who incidentally never wanted to go to war. He was an [inaudible] because he had graduated from dental school during the depression and couldn't make a living, so he entered the army as a dentist. And then he found himself in the Pacific on a hospital ship treating facial injuries.

>> Yeah.

>> And so, that was -- he was -- he was a very dear person to me, as all fathers are, of course. And that -- that gap in my life where he was gone was an essential part of my childhood. And I think often that many of my

books have a very strong father figure in them probably because my father and the lack of a father was so important in my life.

>> Now Crow Call is only one of many of your books that have dealt with or at least been influenced by real life events of yours. Is it difficult or is it easy to fictionalize what is really sort of autobiographical?

>> Well, it depends. The most blatantly autobiographical book of mine is a book called Autumn Street , which deals with the death of a childhood friend. But another one deals with the death of my own sister and that's the book called A Summer To Die , however in the Summer To Die I changed things so much, that it's not recognizable, the circumstances are entirely different. The ages of the girls are different. It's Autumn Street that's -- that's almost -- could be nonfiction because the events in that book happened pretty much the way they really happened. I think it's so in a way cathartic to write about something after a lot of time has passed. I don't think I could've written about either event immediately afterward. But when you look back on something, you sort it out in your mind and you -- you begin to understand it a little better and you're a little more detached from it. So it's not -- it's not that difficult to do [inaudible].

>> Yeah. Now another of your very popular in acclaimed books is The Giver and I read that you -- you actually had a band name itself after the main character in the book. What -- what are your thoughts on that?

>> Say that again.

>> I read that a band actually named itself after the main character.

>> Oh, okay.

>> Yes.

>> It's funny why I misunderstood you. You said band, B-A-N-D and that --

>> That's right.

>> -- is true, there is a band -- a rock band called Jonas Sees in Color and I think that's just extremely cool. They took that name from the book because they loved it and now they're coming out with their first album. And I think that's wonderful, but when you asked me the question, the word I heard was B-AN-N-E-D because the book has been banned so often, so it's a funny [inaudible] position of words that sound alike.

>> Yeah.

>> I love it that the band is named from the book. I do not love it that the book is banned.

>> Now -- now that aspect I didn't know. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

>> Yeah. The book was published -- let me think, I -- probably 1993, so it's been out there a long time -- 15, 16 years, if my math is correct. And during that time, a number of years it's been on the list of -- The American Library Association's list of ten most challenged books in the United States. Challenged, meaning somebody has brought an objection as wanted it removed from a library or a school. That continues to mystify me because I -- I can't, even though they come up with somewhat oddball reasons for wanting it banned, I just can't see anything that objectionable about it except that it makes kids think. And I -- I believe there are number of adults who would prefer that kids not think, that they simply accept everything they're told. So maybe that's why it troubles some parents. But again and again, it's not I who has to deal with it, it's mostly librarians who take up the banner for civil rights and the first amendment and have to go out and fight this battle. In a very few instances, the book has been removed from a school or put on a restricted list. But most often and mostly because librarians have been willing to fight for it, the book has remained and it's often used as part of a classroom curriculum. Teachers love it, simply because it makes kids think.

>> Yes --

>> [Inaudible] age are often 13, 14 when they prefer not to.

>> Yeah. It really has been put on a number of reading lists and influenced rock bands and -- and winning -- winning a Newbery Medal. Why do you think it is that that particular book has really had such resonance?

>> Gosh, if I -- if I knew, I'd write another one [laughter] and do it. There's just no -- no explaining those things. It's timing sometimes, the book comes along at the right time. This is book that postulates a particular kind of future in the world. And of course, we're always interested in that kind of speculation. And -- and books -- there have always been books like that when I was in college. I read Brave New World in 1984. So there's always that fascination for what the world might be like. But I think this particular book coming along when it did -- let me think, 1993 -- immediately after the first Gulf War, when -- when things were beginning to be scary in this country in a way that they hadn't been for a while. So perhaps that's why kids took it up as a way of looking at what life might be like and realizing what their role might be in shaping the future.

>> Let me ask, just I guess going back a little bit. What kind of books when you were a child, really spoke to you?

>> Well, when I was a child and -- and my literate life began in the 1940's, there simply were not as many wonderful children's books as there are today. I mean, I envy kids today. They have such an array of things to choose from and I watch my own grandchildren reading wonderful, wonderful books. So, when I read [inaudible] were the not so great books like the Nancy Drew series. Sorry, whoever publishes Nancy Drew that I said that publicly, but those aren't great books. The Bobbsey Twins, which if you look back and reread them now, you'll find that they're

terribly racist and sexist, but that's what was out there. And -- and then in addition to that, the classics. One of my favorites was *The Secret Garden*, which my mother had read as a child. Not long ago I was asked to write an introduction to a new -- a new addition of *The Secret Garden*, so I reread it and I found it actually holds up quite well. But that's an unusual instance. Most of the -- that literature from the past is very dated and in fact, I wrote a book a couple years ago that's a satire on the -- on the classics. And kind of [inaudible].

>> Well, that's encouraging because I think a lot of critics say that today's culture overall has, you know, been coarse and is -- and is worse than it was in the past. So, that's -- that's I think encouraging to hear.

>> Well, some parts are [inaudible]. I mean, I look at [inaudible] way teenage girls dress and I'm -- I turn into a prim grandmother, "Why do you dress like a slut?" But -- but on the other hand, literature I think and particularly literature for young people has just blossomed. It's just amazing to see what's out there.

>> You mentioned your grandchildren, what do you hope to teach them and -- and other children through your writings?

>> Well, I've always avoided any hint of teaching in my writing. I think if one sits down and attempts to teach a lesson in a book, automatically the book is doomed to fail. I think if you sit down and try to write a great story, then perhaps there will be lessons permeated -- permeating it from within, but to superimpose lessons and morals I think is a mistake. So, I can't say what I hope to teach my grandchildren. I'm not even sure my grandchildren read my books. Heck, one of my grandchildren's 26 years old, he certainly doesn't anymore. But I hope that they enjoy all literature and all good literature. And I hope that some of mine are among the ones they read. Well, Lois Lowry, the new book is *Crow Call* coming out in October. Before I let you go, what's -- what's next for you?

>> I have another book coming out in the -- in the spring, which is illustrated by -- by Jules Feiffer, who's a friend of mine.

>> Oh.

>> And a fabulous illustrator, so I'm very lucky with that. And it's a silly book, I think it would be called by a critic, "A romp," but it's going to be fun. And the name of that is *The Birthday Ball*.

>> Well, we really appreciate your time, Lois Lowry. Thank you so much for joining us.

>> Okay, thank you.

>> And we're excited to hear more from you at the National Book Festival that's --

>> I'm looking forward to that.

>> Well --

>> It will be fun.

>> -- well, great. That is on Saturday, September 26 on the National Mall, 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and that event is free and open to the public. For more details and the complete list of participating authors, you can visit www.LOC.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.