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>> This is Matt Raymond 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 life-long literacy at the National Book Festival. Sponsored by The Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its eighth year, this free event held on the National Mall Saturday September 27, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact the nation's bestselling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend the festival in person, you can still participate online. These podcast interviews with well known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival Website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. In fact, we have some of the world's best authors with us, because I now have the honor of talking with bestselling author Philippa Gregory. Ms. Gregory has a penchant for taking history and weaving compelling tales full of drama and passion, ranging from the times of the reformation to World War 1. Many people know Ms. Gregory best for her book "The Other Boleyn Girl," which is published in 26 countries and was released as a major motion picture in 2007. With more than one million copies in print in the United States alone, "The Other Boleyn Girl" was also the recipient of the Parker Pen Novel of the Year Award in 2002, and The Romanic Times Fictional Biography Award. Her latest book, "The Other Queen" is due out this September. Ms. Gregory, welcome. It's a pleasure to talk with you.

>> Thank you very much. It's lovely to be with you.

>> We appreciate your time. I understand that you began your career as a journalist. What inspired you to pursue novel writing, and in particular, why historical fiction?

>> Well, I didn't really -- I never intended to be a novelist. I did do my training as a journalist. And then after had worked on a newspaper for some years, I realized that what I should have done originally was go to university. So I went to university at the age of 21 and simply fell in love with history at that point. It just seemed to me to explain everything. I was, you know, a very, very partial convert. And from that point I wanted to work as a historian. And when I couldn't get an academic post in the English universities at the time, I just started writing a novel. I had just completed my PhD. And I started writing a novel just for my own amusement. And very quickly thought that it could be published. I knew enough about novel writing by then having worked on novels for my PhD, to think that it was well enough structured and an exciting enough paced story. And amazingly, that was the first novel I have ever written from beginning to end. And that was my novel "Wideacre" which was published in England, America and worldwide and became a worldwide bestseller. You know, it's a really extraordinary story. When I tell it to people I always say, you know, don't hate me for this. It was extraordinary for me.

>> And what can you tell us about your latest book "The Other Queen?"

>> Well, "The Other Queen" is -- the other queen of the title is Mary Queen of Scots. And she is in every sense the old [inaudible] queen both

for Scotland, which has expelled her by the time my novel starts, and for England, to whom she is either Elizabeth's legitimate next heir, or some would say the legitimate heir and Elizabeth is not. So, she's really a kind of alternative and then a threat. What was interesting for me was to study this period in her life, which hardly anybody has had much interest in. But it's actually, she spends more time in northern England than she does at any other place at any other time of her life. She's there for 16 years. And it's after she's been expelled from Scotland as a widow, as, in a sense, a refugee from an uprising. And he is certain that Elizabeth will restore her to the throne of Scotland. And so, indeed, you would expect to happen. But what in fact happens is that Elizabeth betrays her promises to Mary and keeps her under house arrest in England for the next 16 years before Mary's execution.

>> And what do you find compelling about Mary Queen of Scots as a historical figure?

>> Well, probably everything that you wouldn't expect. But, when I was brought up at school and learned the story of Mary Queen of Scots she was very much portrayed as this romantic Roman Catholic, doomed, you know, mistaken woman who fell in love with not one, not two, but three really dreadful men and married them and lived to regret each of them. And was disastrous for them, was disastrous for the country. And who's life is just one long mistake, really. People have really elevated that into a view of what women are like when they're in power. So, for a start, I think there's a whole issue about women in power, which is borne out through the way people read Mary Queen of Scots. But most interestingly for me is that there's now a kind of revival of interest in studies in her. And these are done very much from a new perspective. And people are very much suggesting that what we have in her is actually a woman who was a very astute queen. Who was very determined to be successful. Who was physically, incredibly courageous. Who's prepared to go out in armor, in battle to fight for her throne. And who, when she's imprisoned by Elizabeth of England, goes on fighting and goes on plotting and escaping for, indeed, the whole of the 16 years. I mean, she's a remarkably brave and determined woman. And I don't think we've seen that side of her at all. And that's what I tried to bring over in my novel.

>> Now, how do you translate real historical figures and events into riveting page turners? How do you stay true to history in the process?

>> Well, the first criteria is that you really have to know all the history that there is. So I have a huge amount of research and notes stuck up on my wall, like timelines and where everybody is and what the weather's like and what's going on. So, to start off with the body of the research, I think that really guides the novel. If there's a historical fact that we know to be the case, I never make up an alternative. If we know that she is at somewhere at a certain moment in time, then that's what happens in the novel. Where I create fiction is when we simply don't know where she is or what she's doing. That occurs a bit less with Mary Queen of Scots because she's so well recorded. But very often we don't know the details of the conspiracy or whether, you know, whether the conspirators had been turned, whether they were spies or not. So that, I look at the history quite speculatively. And in terms animating it, of

course I invent all the conversations. And I invent all the inner life, all the psychology of the characters, because they don't keep diaries or that sort of thing. So we almost never know what someone says or what someone feels, because simply that's not recorded by them at the time.

>> Now, you've written several books that have had to do with the Tudors of England from "The Constant Princess," to "The Boleyn Inheritance" and "The Virgin's Lover." What is it about this particular family that fascinates both you and the public so much?

>> I think they're larger than life. So I think you do get these fantastically interesting characters. I mean, Henry, with you know, quite apart from changing the face of England forever. You know, six wives is pretty remarkable. You know, he is a -- you know, and he starts so young and so handsome and so full of promise. And he ends, I think, insane. And you know, hugely obese. And almost a caricature of a tyrant. The women themselves, I think, are very often not understood and not well regarded. And so one sees this kind of extraordinary development of really working on the material and saying I don't think, for instance, Catherine Howard. You know, I think most modern historians would now agree that Catherine Howard has to be regarded differently from how she was written, you know, as recently as 10 years ago, even. So, partly there's that sense of rediscovering the past. And I just think these stories are incredible. It's the society in dramatic change. It's the making of modern England in many ways. So there's much that we can recognize. And there's much that we find strange.

>> Now, your book "The Other Boleyn Girl" you chose to tell this infamous story through the eyes of the little known sister, Mary, as opposed the more illustrious, I guess, historical figure of Anne. Why did you choose to approach it that way?

>> Well, first of all, it was naturally a response to my unbelieving excitement when I discovered the character of Mary Boleyn existed at all. And it's very easy to forget now that before I wrote of her, in a sense, she was unknown to history. She appears as a footnote in the minor historical books. But, you know, as nobody had written a biography of her even. There's nothing. There's nothing on her of any major significance at all. And I came across her and went, like, this is such an extraordinary story. Just imagine being, you know, so intimate in the story of Anne Boleyn and Henry. Imagine being the Boleyn girl he loved first. Imagine stepping aside for your sister. It has such extraordinary ingredients for a novelist. You know, sibling rivalry. A hint of incest in that you're, you know, sleeping with your sister's man. The competition to be queen of England. The decision, which Mary Boleyn, I think consciously takes that she doesn't want to go down that route. Her decision to marry, in a sense, a nobody and walk away from this incredibly glamorous court. It's, you know, it's an extraordinary story, which until I came across it, you know, historians had known, but nobody had seen the potential of it in terms of telling the story of the Tudors through her eyes. So, you know, in a sense now it's so very published, you know? Now so many people have read it, it's obviously interesting. But at the time, you know, when I first came across it, nobody had heard

of her. So it was a really journey of discovery for me. And I think it has been for other people.

>> Now, obviously, you've written extensively about the British monarchy. Have you ever thought about writing about other families, whether royal families in other countries or other families elsewhere?

>> No, I'm pretty committed to the British for two good reasons, I think. One is expertise and one is ignorance. I know, really, quite a lot about the Tudors now. I've built up, you know, a good body of research. I've been working on them for I think, something really frightening like up to ten years now. So I really am familiar with all -- not just the family, but things like the agricultural development, the clothes, the food, the everything you need to know in terms of social history. You know, I've been working on that. So I do know about this. So it's a period that's very comfortable for me to write in. And the other thing is I don't have -- I don't have another language strong enough for me to read original documents in. So I wouldn't -- and I don't know enough about French culture, for instance, or Spanish culture. I did quite a lot on the Spanish royal family in the introduction of "The Constant Princess." And that really was new material for me, you know, like, and, you know, like I'm ashamed to say, many English people. You know, we do focus on English history. We don't know much about international history. I've been very, very interested in America. I continue to be very interested in America. But, you know, you will note that the period that I've written about, which is the "Virgin Earth" in particular, the story of John Tradescant, the gardener who owns property in Virginia and visits in three very key periods of American history and for Virginia. America was part of English colony then. So in a sense the expertise I have on England I can overlap. I'm very conscious that societies may look the same, you know, and be extraordinarily different. And I'm very careful about what I know and what I don't know.

>> I want to ask about your research process. How do you research the facts behind your books? And I have to ask you, obviously, on this side of the pond if you've ever used The Library of Congress?

>> You know, I've never used The Library of Congress. I've never been to Washington. We use your decimal system. So we do -- so, you know, I have great respect in the sense that, you know, I am guided by your codes on books. But it will be a new experience for me when I come to Washington. I'm really looking forward to it. The research is very much library-based, though. I work mostly in a private library in London called the London Library, which is a fantastic institution. Some 100 years old now. It's based in a very old, rather rambling Georgian building. And they have these wonderful -- you would love it. As a librarian I know you would. It has these wonderful metal stacks. So it's -- you just go into the stacks and you can browse in the stacks. But you're on these extraordinary metal floors which are kind of slatted. So if you were wearing high heels -- I'm sure you wouldn't -- but when I am wearing high heels, at any moment you can get absolutely stuck. And nobody would come by for centuries. And of course you wouldn't scream because in you're in a library. So it's a fantastically eccentric place to work. And they have wonderful, wonderful -- they've been a copyright library from the very

beginning. So they have this extraordinary, you know, shelves and shelves and shelves of material of the most extraordinary stuff.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And they also keep things that you wouldn't find anywhere but England, which is like old, old, old editions of parochial magazines. So you never know what you're going to find when you go down to the basement and start looking at the magazine section. So I'm a real researcher. I love -- I love the text. I love the books. I love old books. I don't tend to use original documents very much. My Latin isn't at all strong. And, because until now I've always been working in the Tudors, there's so much, you know, almost all of the original documents, almost all the state papers, have been published, unedited. So you can get everything you need in a published book. Of course, interestingly, more and more stuff comes online. And I imagine I'll be working, you know, more and more online as more and more stuff comes on. And having said that, I'm very, very cautious about some of the sites you can get. I have found myself reading an extraordinary viewpoint of Henry VIII the other day which looked, you know, which said things that I had no idea had taken place whatsoever. And I found out, I was at the end of it, I found that I'd just spent half an hour on some kid's grade paper where he fundamentally made things up. And that's when you go I hate the Internet. This is an absolute waste of my time and energy. But, you know, [inaudible] to post it. He didn't know what he was talking about.

>> Well, now you take characters who are mainly women. And you give them strong voices and ingenuity and power, and sometimes traits that weren't necessarily -- have not been carried out historically. Do you think that there are lessons to be learned in your books and in the way you make your characters so strong?

>> I think very often it's a re-definition of the characters. The one that I think is so startling is probably Catherine Howard, who is, until I wrote my novel, until I read some of the very modern historians on her, was pretty universally regarded as, you know, a very, very stupid girl who found herself [inaudible] married against her will to Henry VIII without the sense to protest. And then, you know, was widely regarded as promiscuous. And, in a sense, partly deserved her death. More recent history has established that she was probably 14 when she was married to Henry VIII. And it think it's absolutely appropriate that a woman and a feminist and a historian such as myself should insist that we look at the record again. We look at her life again in a much more sympathetic sisterly, but also realistic way. And so what chance does a girl of 14 have of opposing the will of a 45-year-old king? Obviously, none at all. You know, her family aren't going to support her. You know, this is an absolutely arranged marriage in a way that we understand or were thought an arranged marriage to be. There's no consent sought from her really at all. Subsequently, her reputation for promiscuity is based upon the fact that she had some kind of sexual experience which may well have been a sexual assault from her music teacher when she was a young girl. She considered herself betrothed and married with a young man when she was a little bit older. And they probably had full intercourse. But she considered herself to be his wife. And he considered her to be his

husband. She then got married off to the king. And nobody inquired about this. So most people knew that something of that nature had gone on. And then there's something like a 16-year-old. She falls really deeply in love with one of the king's gentlemen that she sees daily. And the only letter we have in her own hand is her love letter to him. And it's very moving. If you read it sympathetically, it's the love letter of a girl of 16 in love for the first time. It's genuinely very moving. Now, I can't possibly write a history which suggests that a girl in those circumstances deserves to be put to death for not being faithful to her absolutely physically repellent husband of 45. So, in a sense, this is a redefinition of history. It's certainly a feminist take on history. But I also think it's a just re-writing of history. And, I never offer it as more than another version. You know, I think people should read my version of Catherine Howard and then they're very welcome to read other people's versions of Catherine Howard and make their own mind up. I never claim to be the person who tells the truth. But I do claim to tell the historical facts as I think they may be more justly told.

>> Interesting. I get to talk to many authors. And here's a question that I actually have not asked all that often. And that is, do you experience writer's block?

>> I'm very, very lucky in that the only time I experience writer's block, which is rare, is usually when I'm trying to do something that doesn't suit the structure of the novel. When I'm trying to do something that in a sense will pull the story out of shape. That hardly ever happens now because the shape of the novel is very much dictated by the historical events. So, I start off with a very strong discipline. I'm not free to decide how the story's going to go. History has already done that for me. That's set. But if I'm stuck on something, it's usually because I can't get a voice or because I can't understand somebody or because there's something about them that just blocks me. And that was the case initially when I was writing Lady Jane Watchford in the "The Boleyn Inheritance" because she was -- she's so, to modernize, insanely malicious. It's hard to understand what benefit she got. I mean, she risked her life in order to encourage the young queen into an adulterous affair with another man knowing that that would be Catherine's death. And yet, she continued to do that. And then, ultimately, she was accused of being complicit in it, which she was. And so it cost her her life, too. And you go this is madness, you know? How can such a thing be? So what I do, then, is I take the dog for a long, long, long walk and he knows when I'm stuck because he gets walked off his paws. And if I'm absolutely stuck, I'll take a sandwich in one pocket and a drink in another and I'll just walk out. And I'll go on walking away from my home, which fortunately is on a network of public footpaths in a very beautiful part of England. And I could literally walk probably for a week before I ran into a city. So, I'm going to solve the problem before that happens. I've never yet stayed out after dark. But I often -- it's the unconscious who's doing it. So you have to frighten the unconscious. So I say very loudly, I'm now going to walk. I'm going to walk away from home until I solve this problem. When I solve the problem I'll walk back. And the unconscious gets scared round about dusk, and gives up. And says okay, here's the solution. And it's always there. It's always been there so far. I'm touching wood. You can't see me, but I'm touching wood.

>> Well, before we let you go, I wanted to ask you to tell us a little bit about your charity, Gardens for the Gambia. Where did this idea come from?

>> This is very dear to my heart. I'm very pleased to talk to you about it. I was travelling in Africa researching my novel "The Respectable Trade," which is about slavery. It starts in West Africa and ends up actually in Bristol. It's a novel about slavery in England, in 18th Century England, which, again, not many people know about. But it starts in West Africa, you know, really where slavery has the greatest hold. And I was visiting a school, just for interest. And the school master asked me would I contribute some funds to put a well in the garden of the school. He called it a garden. It was just really an acre of sand. It was incredibly impoverished. And the school, you wouldn't -- I wouldn't keep my horses in the conditions. It was a breeze block building with a corrugated on roof. No water. No drainage. No windows. No desks. No chairs. The children sit on the earth floor and they learn by rote. They don't even have paper and pens. It's a level of poverty that we don't imagine. It's hard to imagine. And anyway, he had this plan that if enough people gave him enough money, he would dig a well in the school garden. He would plant crops. The children would learn a new method of agriculture, which would be based on irrigation from the well, not depending on the rains. And then they would be better farmers later on. And the country would be more productive and not so dependent on rains, which are failing. So, you know, like many foreign people, you know, when you're faced with a demand for your holiday money, I kind of sighed and went well, how much would the well be? And he said 300 pounds, which is about \$600.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> And I said well, I'll tell you what. I'll write you a check for the full amount. And you can fax me. We didn't even have emails. And you can fax me and tell me if it's worked. And I went home and went if I've wasted my money, then woe for me. And if it's worked, then that's pretty neat. And about a fortnight later I got a fax and said the well is dug. It's on stream. We've dug the garden. We've got the seeds in. The children are learning. We've got a -- we've appointed a garden master to teach them. We've got a watchman who's making sure that the animals don't come in an invade. We've planted trees on the outside. And they're going to be our cash crop, oranges and cashew nuts and walnuts. And we thank you very, very much, very much. And the next door school would like a well as well. And I went, well, I thought they would. And what a wonderful, wonderful project. So I wrote an article about it for a magazine. And people sent me donations. And I've paid for the well of the next door school. And that's literally how it started.

>> Well, that's wonderful.

>> It's rolled out across Gambia. We've now got 80 wells. And a school in Chicago is sponsoring us as their year project, which will transform our work next year. So it would just become almost overnight a very much more successful and bigger charity.

>> Well, that's very inspiring. And last question for you Philippa Gregory is, what's next for you? Any new books or projects on the horizon?

>> I've got a very new and very exciting project coming up, which is that I'm going to go back in time. I'm going to write about the Plantagenet family, who are the immediate predecessors of the Tudors. So in a sense it's going to be the arrival of the Tudors in England in the shape of Henry VII, the field of the Battle of Bosworth and the family that immediately preceded him. And they are, you know, if you think the Tudors are pretty wild and uncontrollable lot, the Plantagenets are even worse. I think it's going to be a really exciting project to work on.

>> Well, Philippa Gregory, thank you so much for your time today. We've really appreciated hearing from you.

>> It's been a pleasure. And I'm really looking forward to coming to Washington and meeting you all.

>> Well, and we're very excited to have you. And you, and well, your fans will be able to hear more from you at the National Book Festival. That is Saturday September 27 on the National Mall in Washington between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. If you'd like more details and the complete list of participating authors, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress in Washington, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you for listening.

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