

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. For the past nine years, book lovers of all ages have gathered in the nation's capital to celebrate reading at the Library of Congresses National Book Festival. This year, the library is proud to commemorate a decade of words and wonder at the 10th Annual National Book Festival on September 25, 2010. President and Mrs. Obama are honorary chairs of the event, which provides D.C. locals and visitors from around the country and around the world the opportunity to see and meet their favorite authors, illustrators, poets and characters. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will be between 3rd and 7th streets on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on September 25th, rain or shine. And today I have the privilege to speak with Jane Smiley, who will be at the festival discussing her highly acclaimed new book, *Private Life*. Jane has authored a number of unforgettable novels, including *A Thousand Acres*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 2001 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in 2006 she received the PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature. In addition to her novels for adults and teens, Jane has also been published in *Vogue*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Allure*, *The Nation* and many others. Well, Miss Smiley, thank you so much for joining us today.

>> Morning.

>> We'll talk a little bit about the current work and some of your past works and your progress. I do want to ask about your novel, *Private Life*. It's about a woman's experiences during the 1880s and World War II. Was there any particular reason that you chose those particular time periods to focus on?

>> Well, the novel is based on a sister of my grandfather. My grandfather had four much older sisters, and one of his sisters married a man who was quite notorious in his day for opposing Albert Einstein every step of the way from his little -- I don't know what you'd call it -- his little hide-out or his hold-out, out in San Francisco. And I thought that the uncle, the man himself, was rather interesting because he was so, I don't know, rigid in his opinions and also so self-aggrandizing. But what interested me, really, was his wife, who -- how could you be married to someone like this, what it would be like, and how your life would be and how you -- what your sense of yourself would be married to such an overwhelming person. The character in the novel, the man in the novel is not only loud and intelligent and dynamic, he's also 6 foot 6, so he is overwhelming in almost every way. And I think marriage is an interesting topic anyway, and I was just wanting to explore that idea of being married to someone who was totally overwhelming.

>> Do you think that women readers will relate to the character, Margaret Mayfield, in terms of her struggles? You know, there's a generational, historical divide between women now and then. Is there kind of a tangent that they can draw?

>> Well, there is a generational divide, but marriage sort of remains perennial. Once you're alone in the house with that person, whether it's your husband or your wife, just because times have changed, doesn't mean that that person isn't overwhelming. There are plenty of marriages that

are based on a kind of inequality in breathing space. Let's put it that way. So I don't think -- the book takes place in a certain historical period and I'll go into why that is in a moment, but I don't think marriage itself has changed all that much, except that we have the possibility of divorce and Margaret does not in the novel. But, the characters live at the Naval Shipbuilding Facility at Mare Island in San Francisco because the male character, Andrew, his job is to tell the time. He goes to his observatory every day and he looks at the stars and he tells what time it is. And then at noon, a sailor drops his time ball from the top of the tower and all of the ships in the harbor set their watches. So that's his job, which is an odd little job. And, but at the same time, history just passed through Mare Island in a torrent. And so someone like Margaret, who lives there, is aware of what's going on in the world because the world is present in her world. And so I think that was an interesting place to be in all those eras. She moved there in about 1903 and she lived there or around there until into the second world war, so she's kind of had this seat in the front of the audience for seeing what's happening in the world. And that interested me, too.

>> You mentioned that characters are based on actual people, members of your family. Private life and doing that -- is that a rarity for you or are your characters typically just generated from your own imagination?

>> Well, it's something of a rarity. I have occasionally touched on some characters that I knew in my book, but I think once you get fairly far into your career, your work is no longer autobiographical. It's more about ideas and more about events that you become interested in and characters and their psychology sort of coalesce around events or settings or ideas and you take something from one person and something from another person. At least that's been my experience. But when you start out, you know, it's hard to understand characters and so you scratch your head and you think, okay, well, I need a serial killer. Well, what if you had Jane were a serial killer, what would she be like, you know? So, but as you get more used to it, then the characters start generating themselves. And that's sort of what happened here. Although, there's a lot about the scientists on the internet. Every so often you'll read or I will have read an article that says PJJP was right and then you read all the way down to the second page of the article and the last paragraph is about this person, wonderful machine that was taken away from him at customs and is probably now being used by the CIA to do something. And you realize that, you know, he has generated a following, but they are maybe as misguided as he was in his day. Although, I have to say that now that dark matter has been discovered, I am certain that if PJJP were alive, he would feel vindicated.

>> In terms of your own life, your father was not present for much of your childhood. How did that affect who you are and did that affect your writing?

>> Well, hmm, that's an interesting question. I don't think anybody's ever asked that question before. There was a male presence. My grandfather was around and my grandfather was a very strong male. My grandparents were lots and lots of fun and I think my father might have been more of an authoritarian personality than my grandparents were. I

think I am a kind of person who values freedom and always wants to do the thing that she wants to do and I don't think that my father would have allowed that. So there might have been a personality clash there.

>> Mm-hmm. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

>> That's the way I think about it. You know? I don't think it was a bad thing, actually, given his personality and my personality.

>> Another of your influences as a writer is William Shakespeare, and I'm thinking, in particular, of King Lear and your book, A Thousand Acres. What was it about King Lear? What sort of captured your imagination about that?

>> Well, we read King Lear a lot in high school and college and then graduate school, so I must have read it four or five times with various teachers, and I never truly believed that he was not at fault. I always believed that they were letting -- that the teachers were letting him off the hook and I could never figure out why that was. There's a little them between Goneril and Regan after Lear and his knights have rioted in the castle the night before and they're scratching their heads and wondering why he needs to have 100 knights tearing down the tapestries, overturning the tables and letting the dogs, you know, tear up everything. And I always was sympathetic to them and I thought their desire for order was overlooked by the critical establishment and so, in some sense, I wrote A Thousand Acres to address the issues of, you know -- well, what about these women? Why are they always defying this absolute evil? Why does no one ever allow them to have a point of view? They were truly untouchable, Goneril and Regan, even the most feminist scholars and critics would never, never descent Goneril and Regan. So that aroused my contrary, contrarian impulses, and I thought, well, what's their point of view?

>> Is sort of a retelling or a recrafting of the stories of someone like William Shakespeare, is that daunting? I mean, I think of, you know, the sequel to Gone With the Wind, and how do you compare to Margaret Mead. I mean, what kind of reaction do you get to that?

>> You don't mean Margaret Mead.

>> Margaret Mitchell. You know, I -- you know, in my office I have a poster of Margaret Mead and I was just looking at that and that name got stuck --

>> Yeah, it's funny to think of the two of them sitting in the same room chatting. You know? Well, I think when I started out -- before I wrote A Thousand Acres, I wrote another recasting of a great work or a set of great works, which was the Greenlanders, which, in some sense, is a recasting of Icelandic sagas. And, you know, I'm never -- what can I say? I'm always more interested than I am daunted. Sometimes I'll start in on something and I'll get about halfway through and I'll think, oh, dear. What in the world am I doing? Who do I think I am? You know? But, in fact, that project is so interesting to me that it carries me along and I don't -- I think of it as a response to the work, rather than as a challenge to the author. Do you see what I mean?

>> Yeah. Yeah.

>> And, you can respond to works in a lot of different ways and one of the ways for me is to ponder them. I was supported in my work by William Shakespeare himself, for whom King Lear was a recasting of earlier stories, and I guess I thought well, if he can do it, I can do it. I actually felt -- after I finished writing A Thousand Acres, I felt a lot closer to Shakespeare because I now understood the complexities and the difficulties of the plot and how to make it all work and how difficult it was, and I felt like, you know, I was saying to him, boy, that was hard. I have a feeling you thought it was hard, too. So I felt a sort of artistic camaraderie with him that I hadn't felt when I was a student.

>> You mentioned --

>> The other thing that is true. The other thing about recasting works, which I've done, I think three times now, because I also did that in Ten Days in the Hills, and I recast Decameron. You know, if you're sitting in California and you're reading a book and you and the book are kind of equal partners in whatever you're doing. It's much different to do that than to be walking around London or living in London and seeing statues of these great writers. You're more daunted when you're close to them. From a far distance, like from California, they don't look so big. They look as big as a book, rather than as big as a giant.

>> Mm-hmm. The Greenlanders stemmed from your experience in Iceland when you were on a Fulbright Scholarship, but I read that in a lot of respects, that wasn't a pleasant experience for you.

>> It could be alone in Iceland and it was getting darker and darker every day and to not be a very good speaker the language and to be stuck in my little room by myself with only one friend. [Laughter] You know, what can I -- it wasn't a good or a bad experience. It was just a totally interesting experience. I struggled with the language. I went to my classes. I did what I could. I made a few friends, which I enjoyed a lot, and I was perennially amazed by the landscape because it was a volcanic landscape and there were no trees and some things about it were just very grand and some things about it were just totally fascinating. Like, you always knew when you were walking down the street in Reykjavik who were the Americans and who were the Icelanders. If you could hear them talking, they were Icelanders. If you couldn't hear them talking, they were American. Icelanders were used to shouting above the wind and so you could always hear them talking. So, for me, it was a really interesting experience of being in a culture that was quite different from my own. And I also read lots and lots of books, you know, and it was dark 22 hours a day. It was funny at times to read and so I got caught up on a lot of reading from things like Anna Karenina and stuff that I hadn't read before.

>> And, of course, during the summer you could go outside and read a newspaper at midnight. Right?

>> Well, yes. Then the sun began to come up and the days got lighter and that was really amazing, too. And then I did have a friend who had a car and so we did do some driving around and it was wonderful to see the landscape. So, in some sense, Iceland was a turning point for me and it wasn't that I -- and I was aware that that was happening, that certain parts of my future were kind of taking shape and jelling while I was there. And that's not always a terribly pleasant experience, but it's not a bad experience. It's a good experience.

>> After you got your bachelors degree, you worked on an archaeology dig in Europe. How did that come about?

>> Well, my first husband and I wanted to go to Europe and we heard about that you could go work on a dig in England, and in this case it was in Winchester Cathedral. I don't quite know how we heard about it, but it was just a job and a very -- they gave you room and board, basically, to do this. He was a medievalist and I was interested in medieval things, so it seemed like a great thing to do. I was a careful digger. I would always dig down, rather than scraping across. So they finally removed me from the dig so that I could do no more damage and they had me go around every time someone found a coin or something, i was the person who went and put it in a little bag and marked where it had been found. But the dig was just below the cathedral. It was really quite inspiring, in some ways, to be surrounded by that architecture and it was really fun.

>> You say the word inspiring. Did that trip in any way inspire any of your later works?

>> Oh, absolutely, because one of the -- one of my fellow diggers then went on to do archeology in Greenland and he and his girlfriend -- we had a little room in a house, which seemed rather primitive to me, but this guy and his girlfriend lived in a tent behind the house. And when it came time to dig the old cannery pit, and you know in the middle ages, they tanned with manure, he and his girlfriend volunteered to dig up the tannery pit. And so he would hold her by her ankles and she would just dig down and down and down into the 600 year old manure pit. And I remember they didn't take any showers for about the three or four days that it took them because why worry, you know? They were just living in a tent. And I thought they were really amazing and so I stayed in touch with him. So when I wrote The Greenlanders, he had done Greenland archaeology and I got in touch with him and said, would you read my book? And he did and told me what was right and what was wrong about what I thought about The Greenlanders.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> So, I was just enthralled by medieval things for a very long time by the architecture, by the way that people lived, by the way they looked in pictures, by the whole Europeanness of it. And I guess that lingered, you know, because I went back to the Boccaccio with great enthusiasm, too. So, there's just something about that period that I always found interesting.

>> Well, before I let you go, are there any upcoming projects that you want to let your readers or fans know about?

>> Yes. For young readers, the first volume of my books called the Georges and the Jewels, that's now out in paperback. And the second volume, which is called A Good Horse, is out in hardback at the end of October. And, for others, you know, I've also written a book that will be out in early October about the invention of the computer, which turns out to be a very dramatic set of events, full of absolutely interesting characters. There's about eight characters in my book.

>> Is that non-fiction or historical?

>> Yes, it's non-fiction.

>> Okay.

>> These are true-life characters, everyone from the very famous Alan Turing to the very obscure Tommy Flowers, who was Alan Turing's colleague. And from John Vincent at NASA to Konrad Zuse, who really was inventing the computer in Germany and had a really hair-raising set of experiences. So, that book will be out in early October and I just was interviewed in Wired for that book. This is a story that people need to know, not just because the computer is so important, but also because the story itself is just amazing and I loved writing the book.

>> Well, Jane Smiley, thank you so much for taking time out to talk with us today.

>> Oh, my pleasure.

>> And the new book, again, is Private Life, and we look forward to hearing more from her about that at the Poetry and Prose Pavilion at the National Book Festival. That's September 25, 2010 on the National Mall.

>> Can I say one more thing?

>> Yes, certainly say one more thing.

>> The computer book is called The Man Who Invented the Computer.

>> And that being one man verses eight people?

>> John Vincent. It's John Vincent at the NASA.

>> Okay.

>> The Man Who Invented the Computer.

>> Well, that certainly is, certainly is something that lives on today with the internet in all of our daily lives. So that should be interesting. We look forward to that one. Again, National Book Festival, September 25th from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on the National Mall. This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Thank you all for listening.

