

APL Volumes

Season 3, Episode 4: AUTHORS ON THE DL

*This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.*

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

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Hello, fellow lit lovers, and welcome to Season Three of APL Volumes, coming to you from the very heart of downtown Austin, your Central Library. I'm your host, Genn Mehalik, avid reader and admin senior for the Customer Access Division of APL. This season we are turning the pages to explore the intriguing connections between books and the lives of their authors. Each episode will have a unique theme and guest. All of our guests are fellow staff members, brilliant, passionate folks that I am so lucky to work with. So I'm very excited to hear their hot takes. Whether you are a dedicated bibliophile or just looking to add a new chapter to your podcast playlist, you can go to bed at night knowing APL Volumes, Season Three, was made just for you.

The theme of this episode is undercover stories, and I'm talking to ThuAnh Nguyen, who is the manager of the Central Library's Gift Shop. If you've never been in the Gift Shop, it's the best place to get decked out in APL merch from head to toe. They also have stationery, art supplies, puzzles, games and all sorts of things that I would love personally to be gifted. But I digress.

GENN: Hi, ThuAnh!

THUANH: Hi, Genn! Thanks so much for inviting me.

GENN: Yeah, I'm really excited. I think you have a good radio voice, actually.

THUANH: Really? Thank you. Wow.

You know that somebody who worked at PBS commented on that. I worked with her for the Asian American Film Festival two summers ago and she mentioned that. I was like, "I never thought of it that way." And then I got this...

GENN: You saw your future in radio for a moment?

THUANH: No, I got more self-conscious, actually.

GENN: Well, you don't have to think about it.

So our theme today is undercover. So we both read books about different undercover stories. And you are going to start by telling me about yours, which I don't know about. So that's good.

THUANH: Yeah, for sure. So I picked *Nickel and Dimed*, by Barbara Ehrenreich. And I hope I am pronouncing that correctly.

This book was written awhile ago. It started in 1998, and it was published in 2001. Barbara, the author, was then in her late fifties. Her background was that she actually had a PhD in cellular immunology.

GENN: Wow. That's like what I'm interested in.

THUANH: That's really interesting. And she was a devout feminist. She worked as a freelance writer. And she was known for her social commentary, book reviews, and reporting. And so after some back and forth with her editor, she decides to go undercover, leaving her upper middle-class life, to explore how minimum wage workers can or can't make it in America.

And the way that she structures it is that she will work a series of minimum wage jobs in three different states. She'll try to secure housing and manage to feed herself. But she does have some special considerations. She will always have transportation in the form of a car. She'll have some start-up money to help with housing deposits and ensure that she won't go hungry.

And she also, she has some privileges. She's white. She's a native English speaker. She's in good health. And she's educated, though she resolves not to use any of her education in securing a job.

GENN: You mean she wouldn't put it on the resume? And stuff like that? Like job applications? She wouldn't say, "I have a masters" or something like that?

THUANH: Not to the extent of her full education. But she does put three years of college. So right before graduation.

GENN: Which is why it is realistic. A lot of people do stop at that point, for whatever reason. So she's basing it on a kind of common experience for middle or lower middle class or something?

THUANH: Yeah, I think so. And to make it more relatable too, because if you were like me in college, I changed my major like five times.

GENN: Yeah, me too!

THUANH: I know a lot of people who ended up having that, after changing their major so many times, they just didn't end up graduating. They got a job and they started doing something living their life in another way.

GENN: Exactly.

THUANH: So she kicks off her story in Key West, Florida, which is really close to where she currently lives. And so she has some reservations about people recognizing her. But more on this later.

She applies for twenty-plus jobs, and she doesn't hear back from a majority of them. And realizes that a lot of these job postings are actually just kind of feelers to see how many people are looking for this type of work or to kind of set up back-up workers in high turnover jobs.

GENN: That's so sad.

THUANH: Yeah. She finally gets a job serving at a diner that is attached to a motel called Hearthside. And she changes all the names and places of people in this book. But she starts off making \$2.43 an hour, or around \$7 after tips. So not very much at all.

And she ends up not making enough for rent and decides to pick up another job, this one at another diner that is attached to a motel called Jerry's. But it has a lot more people coming to it. She mentions it's a chain.

GENN: If she's in Key West there is a lot of touristy stuff.

THUANH: I've been trying to figure out which one it is. And I'm thinking maybe Denny's or IHOP, something like one of those really big national chains.

But I was also thinking about, what is it when Jennifer Aniston says she has a piece of the flair?

GENN: Flannigans? Is that what it is?

THUANH: *Office Space*.

GENN: Yeah, yeah, *Office Space*. But is the restaurant Flannigan's? Or Bennigan's? One of those?

THUANH: Bennigan's, I think? Was it?

GENN: I think so.

THUANH: Where they had the Monte Cristo sandwich?

GENN: That was Bennigan's. Yeah.

THUANH: I was thinking something like that. One of the big chains.

GENN: I remember that because I used to deliver food when I was like seventeen and yeah, had one of those jobs. And people always ordered that sandwich. It was so popular.

THUANH: I mean, it's the ultimate savory-sweet combo.

So I wanted to read this excerpt from the book where she compares the way that Jerry's is laid out to a digestive system, putting her bio degree to good use, and I just thought it was really funny and creative.

"The kitchen is a cavern, a stomach leading to the lower intestine that is the garbage and dishwashing area from which issue bizarre smells combining the edible and the awful, creamy carry-on pizza barf in that unique and enigmatic Jerry scent, citrus fart."

GENN: If you've ever worked in the food industry, I think you can relate to that.

THUANH: She really paints a picture there.

GENN: It doesn't matter how clean the kitchen is, it's always going to be like kind of gross.

THUANH: For sure.

So, working both jobs, it ends up taking fourteen hours a day. Which, can you imagine working that long?

She ends up quitting Hearthside and gets a job housekeeping at the motel Jerry's is attached to. She only works both jobs for one day. She ends up quitting after a really stressful night at Jerry's, and leaves Key West for Portland, Maine.

So, some thoughts there. She is constantly occupied with busy work at these jobs, which keeps the people who work there servile and occupied. It makes them take up all their time, and all the while they are earning that minimum wage, which is like \$2 and some cents an hour. And not earning tips because this is all invisible back work.

Employees are treated with suspicion and are micromanaged, down to how many croutons they are allowed on a salad.

So when you are in the working class you end up identifying a lot with the people that you serve because they too are part of the same. And so you want to treat them, and you see they are working really hard. So if you can give them extra dressing or extra croutons or extra cheese and it is within your power to do so, then she and her fellow servers will do that. But if caught by management, they will be punished. So they do it kind of on the sly.

GENN: Yeah, that's super common, I think. You know the value of a Coke, the restaurant, what they are paying if you, for one cup of soda. I think at McDonald's it comes down to a penny, less than a penny, actually, they figured out.

So then, as somebody who works there, if that's the only thing that you can do, your only power or your only way to make somebody have a better day if they are having a bad day. You don't think about it. But it is like, yeah, you get punished for something, wasting their money but it is like less than a penny at the end of the day.

THUANH: Yeah, it's such a small amount. But it is blown up to be this big thing when found out.

Minimum wage workers, they are also seen as unimportant and are made to feel invisible, which is evidenced by they can't enter through the front door of the diner. Which is very *Downton Abbey*.

GENN: Oh man, that's so real. I have not thought about that in so long. You can't even park a lot of times in the regular parking lot. You get there at 5:00 AM as like a cook, and you have to like park far away and walk. Nobody is even there. It's just you have to leave the spaces for the customers. That's all standard, but I think all those little things add to making you feel just like less than a regular person. Less than human, kind of.

THUANH: Yeah. I feel like it is a psychological tactic, almost, to kind of dehumanize you. To make you feel so less than, that you don't collectivize and speak up and advocate for yourself because you don't feel like you deserve it.

GENN: Is that how she like talks about it, too?

THUANH: She does mention that a lot.

GENN: Yeah. Because I see it more, like I didn't really think of it that way. I just thought of it like our society is like based on capitalism. The higher-ups are just thinking about their customers, really. Customers before workers.

THUANH: It creates and contributes to this invisible caste system as well. In America people are always saying it's free, everybody is equal, but there are very clearly defined groups, especially when you are relegated to these roles.

OK, so let's move on to the next city where she goes to, which is Portland, Maine. Not Portland, Oregon.

GENN: Not Portland, Oregon.

THUANH: She gets a job at a nursing home helping patients in the Alzheimer's ward. She finds the job rewarding in heart but laborious, especially when it comes to cleaning up after meals, because the industrial dishwasher is inconveniently broken. So she ends up having to do everything by hand.

She also gets another job at this place called The Maids, cleaning people's houses. And she learns that the company charges clients \$25 per cleaner per hour, whereas she and her coworkers only get paid \$6.65 an hour. To kick off that job she watches videos on how to clean and realizes that the focus is actually on making the place look clean rather than actually cleaning it.

There's also some dark humor in there when the video focuses on how to wield the really heavy backpack vacuum cleaner that they have to use. And it tells the viewer that they are the vacuum cleaner. The vacuum cleaner is an extension of yourself.

On the job the maids end up only having just a few minutes for breaks, and so they'll just scarf down whatever they have on hand or can afford. It usually is like a bag of chips or nothing, or a few sips of water. And so a lot of them get dizzy, they get exhausted.

GENN: That's hard work.

THUANH: Yeah. Back-breaking labor.

Her manager is also the only male on the team, and wields this weird *Charlie's Angels* type of power dynamic over them.

GENN: That sounds creepy.

THUANH: Yeah, it is inherently very.

There's also, here's a little juicy bit, literally and figuratively. During a shift Barbara spills liquid from a bag that's holding a toilet brush. And she doesn't have a change of socks or the time to address it. And ends up just sloshing around for the rest of her shift in poop socks.

GENN: That's so gross.

THUANH: I would die inside.

She also notices that a lot of her coworkers have physical ailments that aren't taken care of due to cost or time and are told to work through it by management, as if working through it were a badge of honor. So if you are in a job where you earn sick time, take it.

GENN: Yeah. This reminds me of one time I had a job that required me to bend down a lot and get on my knees all the time. It was a very lax dress code, so I wore jeans all the time. You weren't allowed to wear jeans with holes in them but I would frequently rip my jeans on the knees during my shift. They would just break because I was always getting down. And they would sometimes, if they noticed, send me home to change. And I would lose that hour or whatever of money and pay because of that. But it happened there because of the job. And we couldn't wear shorts or anything. I thought it was crazy.

THUANH: That's really tough. And Barbara talks about, she develops this tic where she starts picking at her clothes from stress. And I remembered, I had some jobs in college too that were really physically demanding and I would wear through those clothes really fast.

And she was also responsible for buying, in a lot of cases, the uniforms that were required. If she didn't have those pieces of clothing in her wardrobe already she had to go out and spend like \$30 on a pair of slacks that she didn't have. That was taking away from her rent money.

GENN: Or they would just take it out of your check. I remember that.

THUANH: So yeah, the second chapter really focuses on the stark divide between the rich and the poor. Some of the clients that she cleans for, they will leave traps around the house. Like mounds of dirt to ensure the maids are being thorough.

GENN: That is so weird.

THUANH: And some of them are present while the maids are cleaning, and so they are just watching them like a hawk. They are not leaving them to do what they are trained to do.

GENN: Pro tip. Don't do that. That's annoying and weird.

THUANH: Please don't.

GENN: I used to work on cars, and people would sometimes sneak to the back where the bays are. It was a dealership, a garage with a bunch of bays and cars in the air. And for a lot of reasons that's not allowed. Liability. It's dangerous. There's chemicals everywhere. Anyway, they would just come back there, whether they walked through the building or around the building, the giant dealership lot of cars that usually has a retention pond and everything. And they would just walk all the way back and around the gates and just watch everything you did on their car, and ask questions.

Which, I get it. I'm interested in a lot of things. But nobody can work efficiently like that.

THUANH: Yeah. So it's kind of a question of whether they are trying to ensure that what you are doing, they are kind of undermining what you are doing there.

GENN: Even if they are not, it feels that way. It's uncomfortable.

THUANH: On the other hand, it can also feel like you are an animal and they are just watching you for entertainment purposes.

GENN: That's true.

I feel like my book relates to your book in some ways.

THUANH: So some of things, like objects, are seen completely differently by the clients versus the people who are cleaning it. Such as books, which are seen as pleasurable, leisurely things to have, whereas the maids see it as time consuming things to clean because they have to go one-by-one for each book.

She also finds that the roads around the area in which she lives are set up for drivers, not pedestrians, so you have to be really bold to just dart across the street, even if there's a crosswalk for you, because drivers are not used to seeing pedestrians in that area especially. It can get a bit dicey.

And then she also notes that some of her clients, they will go on retreats, and they'll do chores on these retreats as part of the meditation. They are choosing to do this, while the working poor have to hold down several jobs just to stay afloat.

So finally chapter three takes Barbara to Minneapolis, Minnesota. She interviews for Menards, which is a grocery store, and Walmart. She initially wants to take the job at Menards because they tell her that they will start her at \$10 an hour. But she finds out that isn't the case when she shows up for her first day of work and they are like, "What are you talking about? No one ever promised you this." And they try to start her lower.

And so she ends up taking the job at Walmart for \$7 an hour.

GENN: On principle. Because they lied to her.

THUANH: Yeah. Because she is upset.

But at Walmart she has to go through this all-day boring orientation affair, which touts a lot of anti-union messaging. And then there are just phrases thrown around like time theft, and where employees must never not do work on the clock, but then their time isn't considered in return.

Additionally she encounters a lot of issues with securing housing. The first place she ends up finding is leased to somebody else when she comes to move in.

She then moves into a hotel, and then ends up having the room because of a sewage backup. That room doesn't have any AC. It features a single window, no screen.

She's also told later on that she has to pay \$55 for any additional nights, and so she moves into a nominally cheaper spot at the Comfort Inn for \$50 a night. At the end of the day she realizes that she can't afford either. And she's actually advised to move into a shelter until she can save enough money for the first month's rent deposit on an apartment.

So this final chapter brings up a lot of the personality tests that she encounters basically encourages job seekers to lie and to provide answers that they think employers are looking for rather than to present their authentic selves.

Drug tests hammer home the lack of bodily autonomy. Also bag searches and petty rules contribute to that. Barbara starts getting stomachaches, which is a symptom of high levels of cortisol and a manifestation of stress. She also unlocks a person named Barb, who is more callused and capable of holding on to grudges, who isn't representative of who she is normally.

GENN: Like that's another person who comes out from within her?

THUANH: Yeah. That she didn't know was in there and came out.

She resents customers who don't put things back, which causes a lot of unnecessary work for her and her coworkers. And she does also note that there are certain customers that come into the shop primarily just to behave badly, because they are trying to let off steam from their own stressful lives.

GENN: Wow.

THUANH: Yeah. There is a lot to unpack with this book here. I could sit here for hours and talk to you about that.

GENN: I know.

THUANH: But I wanted to sum it up with one last excerpt from the book. This is part of her final analysis.

"The working poor, as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for. They live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect. They endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor to everyone else. As Gail, one of my restaurant coworkers put it, "You give and you give." Someday, of course, and I will make no predictions as to exactly when, they are bound to tire of getting so little in return and to demand to be paid what they are worth. There will be a lot of anger, and when that day comes, strikes and disruption. But the sky will not fall, and we will all be better off for it in the end."

GENN: Aw. It's like a happy ending, of revolt, impending revolt, but still.

THUANH: It's a bit grim, but there is some optimism in there.

GENN: Yeah, what strikes me the most is how like little things have changed, and that was written in 1998. You know? It's been a long time. It's still relevant.

I think she actually died last year.

THUANH: In 2022. At eighty-something years old.

GENN: Yeah, well. But people still talk about this book. And it gets republished. Like, what is it called? Like new editions are constantly coming out. New printings. There you go. So yeah, I've heard of it. And you know, there are shows like *Undercover Boss* and whatever. Lots of spinoff things of that nature. Have you seen any of those.

THUANH: I have, and a lot of them, I'm like, "Does anyone believe that this is not the boss?" In fact, there's somebody who is dressing up to play this role.

GENN: OK, now I'm going to tell you about mine, and then we can talk about how they relate, because I'm curious what you think.

So I read this book called *Gator Country*, and it's about Florida, which is where I'm from. So I was excited to read about it.

Actually, the woman who wrote it, her name is Rebecca Renner. She is probably about my age, actually. She is somewhat of an environmentalist, but maybe just as a hobby. I think that just comes with the .... If you're from Florida you grow up so much in nature, by default it becomes like, especially if you leave. After I left Florida it's like even more magical to me because I miss it. It's nostalgic.

And a lot of what she talks about in the book, there's two parts. There's like the undercover story, and then also the part about Florida, the history of Florida. And a lot about the species and conservation efforts and things like that.

And she talks a lot about, from her own voice, how Florida is kind of made into a joke in the media. You know, it's like Florida Man. There are a lot of memes. And every headline. There was even a thing where you type your birthday and Florida and read the headline. That was a long time ago.

THUANH: I saw that.

GENN: It was like a joke. All of them were insane. You know? All the headlines you could find.

And I feel like people who write headlines in Florida, they are playing to that, you know?

THUANH: They lean into the eccentric nature?

GENN: Yeah. And so her aim is kind of to show the other side of Florida. Which is, there are real people who live here and have been here for like centuries. For a long time.

So the undercover operation is called Operation Alligator Thief. And the guy who goes undercover, his name is Jeff. His fake name is Curtis but his nickname is Jeff because it is always smart to use as much truth as you can when you go undercover so you don't get stuck in your lies.

So he introduces himself as Curtis but he's like, "Everyone calls me Jeff." Which I think is funny, as they have nothing to do with each other, but nobody questions it.

So he works for the Florida Wildlife Conservation, the FWC. And he's basically kind of like a nature cop. He works in the Everglades and has to catch poachers. That's his main job, is actually catching poachers, because it is like a huge industry down there.

I don't know, I feel like most people don't realize, but if you look at a map of the country and zoom in on Florida and you actually make it an aerial image instead of vectors and stuff, it's like almost the bottom half of Florida, it's like what people call swamp but it's really like wetlands. You know?

And everything that is like the cities is all on the right coast, like on the east coast of Florida. And so it's like all these roads and everything, and then the whole rest, like more than half, is all wetlands. And I think we just forget that. Well, a lot of people don't even look at Florida in the first place. But even I grew up there and lived there most of my life. I grew up really close to the Everglades. And it still didn't ever really hit me that is like the majority of the state.

You know, we rarely go there unless you live there.

Anyway, so Jeff is tasked with, he's kind of like about to retire, actually. So I think he is in his sixties already. But they chose him because he is really good in training, where they have to practice undercover, going undercover. He, actually in his training... in order to like create a diversion, which they were told to do, create a diversion. They didn't get any other instructions. And they were in a public place, like actually in a real place like McDonald's or something.

And then the police come and he has to create a diversion or something, and he starts digging in the trash. He's also already dressed undercover, so he looks kind of raggedy. That was how he dressed himself.

So he starts digging in the trash and finds a chicken bone. And apparently literally chewed on it as part of the distraction. And so they were extremely impressed with him for doing that. Which I guess I would be too if that was the job.

THUANH: He's really good at method acting.



GENN: Yeah. That's actually the term they used, too. That's how he gets chosen. And he's like, "I don't want to do this. I'm about to retire. Life is good. I just want to fish or whatever for the rest of my life." But something about it, it's like the excitement, the thrill. He can't say no.

And he's kind of like a hero in the sense of like the hero's journey. He always makes decisions based on the moral good. What's good for the environment. What's good for people. Which kind of brings him later to a predicament as he goes undercover and he has to start an alligator farm from scratch. They give him \$200 and he has to go and basically infiltrate the culture in the, it's called the 10,000 Islands, which is kind of like when you go to the tip of Florida where all the land breaks into tiny little islands, essentially. But there's not actually 10,000 of them. That's what it is called.

THUANH: Like Minnesota, with the Land Of 10,000 Lakes?

GENN: Yes.

THUANH: Except, are there actually 10,000 lakes there?

GENN: Nah, I doubt it. There can't be. Well, I don't know. I don't know anything about Minnesota.

THUANH: I grew up there. I spent most of my childhood on a lake. There were several. But I don't know if people counted the exact amount.

GENN: Yeah, I feel like if you call something, anything, 10,000 whatever, it's probably hyperbole.

But what do I know about Minnesota?

So in the Everglades, especially in that area, there's like lots of towns. The one that he is in is called Chokoloskee. They are all kind of long words, like old Native names, you know? The Calusa, the Miccosukee, the Seminole, which is like the most well-known. All of those tribes used alligators. The Florida alligator is its own species, and they all used them for their hides, for their meat. But they also used them in ceremony and respected them in that sense.

So all of their practices, which become like labeled as poaching, are actually very sustainable. They are done with respect to the land and the species itself. Kind of like they know what they need to do to have these resources in the future.

For instance, some of their practices are based on sustainability. Like they know what is in season when, so they hunt and gather according to the season. They also migrate according to like, just to keep a replenishable stock of the things they use.

THUANH: So they don't overdo it.

GENN: Exactly. So they don't, like, I mean, what Jeff was doing undercover working for the government, he was trying to prevent the same things. But they were the ones that were getting kind of punished by the government systems by doing these things.

And the book kind of like is really interesting because it shows you that the government came and essentially displaced a lot of people. Or they, you know, used them and paid them minimum wage and minimum amount of money to map the area for them so they could divert the waterways and do all of this in the name of construction and development.

Then the people who all come down and live there and make Florida what it is seen as, the tourist place that it is. Then they come in and they are like, "There's a gator in my back yard. It's a nuisance." And they are calling the government, the same people that Jeff works for, to come remove it.

And what happens is that most of those nuisance gators get euthanized. That's legal. They are legally coming in as government officials, taking the animals and euthanizing them. The statistic for that is like way higher than the people who are native to the land and who are "poaching," which is what it is called ultimately, by taking gators for their hides or their bones or whatever and using it as tools and ways of living and feeding their families.

I don't know. I just love that she shows both sides. She doesn't take a side even though she's Floridian. And she also writes about Jeff with a lot of, like she really respects him, you can tell. She kind of like gets into his head. They became friends. And she knows him inside and out now. So she really focuses on his motivation.

At the beginning of the book it's like his main motivation is wildlife preservation. But at the end it's like he sees the humanity in all these people and he has a hard time. Like knowing he's been doing this sting operation for two years that's going to put all these people who are just like regular people, and granted some of them are doing nefarious things and taking eggs from gator, like actual alligator nests in the wild. I think the law allows them to take a certain amount. I don't know if it is like 100 or something. And then they take 500.

So he doesn't want that. He wants the alligator to thrive ultimately. But he sees that they are doing it because they have three kids and they have no other way. This is what they learned growing up. This is their skill set. This is how they support their family.

He gets to know all these people so it is hard for him.

I'll leave some mystery because there is a lot in the book. There is also a lot of beautiful scenery and writing about the state in general. It made me feel really nostalgic.

THUANH: I've only been to Florida once. And that was to go to Orlando.

GENN: I was going to say Disney.

THUANH: Yes, in 2000 for Disney World. So admittedly I don't know very much about Florida other than the sensational headlines that do tend to pop up.

GENN: Yeah, I would encourage anyone to just like even search Florida Everglades. There's a national park. There's three reservations on the land. And just like looking at the pictures that people post to the internet. You can scroll through them. It's just so beautiful. Like when people think of a swamp they think of like muck and grossness and leeches. But really what you are going to see is like beautiful sunsets that you would not see anywhere else. At least I haven't yet. And very clear, beautiful waters. There's a very rich ...

THUANH: Ecosystem.

GENN: Yes. It is extremely diverse. Alligators are a sentinel species, which means that when they start to decline, that tells about the whole ecosystem of the area. So there was a time when they were endangered. That was like in the sixties, I think. And some people criticize the government and the FWC for the regulations they place on the livelihoods of these people. But I guess she also shows the side where they don't want that to happen again. They did a lot of things to save the alligator, and now it's proliferated so much people see them as pests.

But we need them because they are like the highest in their food chain, like an apex predator. You need that or everything else goes out of balance. Everything, when that gets messed up.

And one of the things she says in the book is like people often pit themselves against nature. Or it's like they take a side. They are fighting for nature or they are fighting for people. They choose when you are going to develop the land. You have to choose. And she talks about if you choose either one then you are going to lose both. Because they need each other so much that you have to choose to focus on both or you'll lose both. Basically.

THUANH: I think it is really interesting that they use the term poaching for when people who are native to that area are sustainably using the resources to support their families and their own livelihoods. There is always a question. Because it is arbitrary, isn't it? Where are these laws and rules? What are they based on?

GENN: Exactly.

THUANH: And where did they come from? And what are they in consideration of? And what are they favoring? Because now if an alligator or a croc encroaches upon a development, they don't know the difference.

GENN: That's where they've always been.

THUANH: Exactly. They are now villainized and removed and euthanized. But it comes down to arbitrary rule.

GENN: Which I think a lot of people don't think they are arbitrary. But she does a good job of explaining some examples of poaching like people don't realize. I can't think of any off the top of my head, but I remember being shocked that was poaching. It's just because they are very arbitrary.

One of the things that's a lot that you have to do to even if you have a permit to collect alligator eggs, which is a thing because they don't breed at all in captivity, never have. So they have to get the eggs if they want to have baby gators.

You have to, every nest you open, you have to leave one untouched that you see physically. So they have to go through the swamps, find a nest. They can open it and take a certain number of eggs. But the next time they find a nest they have to leave it untouched and then go find the third one in order to take more eggs.

So it's really interesting. Why wouldn't they say, "This is your limit on eggs." Or "This is your limit on nests." It's like in order to know that it is fifty percent of what they saw, I guess, they have to actually go out with a biologist legally and they have to witness them see a nest and not touch it. It's very bizarre.

But anyway.

Some of the things that I think are common in our stories are talking about a certain class of people, a certain way of making a living, and how you get punished for doing things that you need to do to survive, basically.

THUANH: Yeah, and I think there is a lot of division between that instead of unity. We are more alike, and our dealing and railing against and trying to overcome a lot of the same issues, but we get divided on, intentionally and unintentionally in a lot of ways. And that prevents people from coming together and commiserating and collectivizing to make it better. Because it is a huge, unequal divide where the majority of us are at the bottom. It's the very few at the top who are making these decisions that affect us all.

Yeah, being divided on something arbitrary keeps us from coming together.

GENN: I was curious because another thing I thought about comparing was kind of like the mindsets of the people undercover, and what did it do to them? How did they feel undercover?

I like how you talked about her alter ego kind of. Barb. Was her name Barb?

THUANH: Barb.

GENN: And she just became angry, and you see that a lot in the world. It's like you work so hard for so little. You are spread so thin, and it affects your mood.

With my character, he's a real person but, he was, he had to live out in this completely different town, far from his actual wife and family. And he couldn't tell them anything because it was such a risk for any of this information to

get out. So he had to really become this person. The loss of his community basically was really, really hard on him emotionally.

It was just like interesting to read about that part, too.

THUANH: Yeah, I think because we as humans are inherently emotional....

GENN: And communal.

THUANH: Yeah. You can't divorce yourself from that, and it will affect you, despite how hard you try to separate. You are on assignment. And you hear this from actors who do go into method acting and who are deeply affected by roles because they went through what their character did. It's not acting anymore. It's being.

GENN: Yeah, I've always thought that was so interesting and weird. I've heard that from some actors, and I'm like, really? I guess it's just hard for me to imagine. But it's true. They lose tons of weight or gain a lot of weight. They just do things to their body even that are ...

THUANH: Yeah, and that will affect your mental state.

GENN: Totally. We can end there, but like my character, he talks about, it's like hard for him to take these gator eggs and know that he's like taking them and sacrificing their lives, basically, like hundreds of them. But it's for their mission, which is ultimately to save the species.

THUANH: So there's a lot of cognitive dissonance there.

GENN: Exactly.

I think these stories are important because people have to love something to save it. Like I talked about how Florida is basically a joke and a swamp is pretty gross to people in their minds. That's why I was kind of encouraging looking at pictures of what it is like, because people will pay tons of money to go to places that look like this on vacation. They just don't think that is what it looks like down there, on the Florida coast or whatever.

But not just that, but learning about the species. A lot of the gators that are being poached are going to the tourism business, which is bringing people there, showing them these animals. Some people can talk bad about it. But some people have never seen a gator, and when they see it, it's amazing to them. You know? Like pretty close to a dinosaur. And it blows their mind, and then they care about that thing for the first time in their life.

You are not going to save something that you don't care about. I think that's why these stories are important, in my, talking about my book at least.

THUANH: Bringing things to life so that people can see it and therefore care about it. So long as they are invisible or swept under the rug, not seeing them, why do you care about something you don't know about?

GENN: It just stays as a stereotype in everyone's mind.

THUANH: Yeah.

GENN: I mean, your book and my book both talk a lot about the challenges of governing, like having a system that works for people, not just the people at the top of the system, but like how do we make these systems and then they go, they do the opposite of what you want, which is to have a healthy society, thriving community, thriving economy.

You have to create a balance to have all those things. And if you are just running people down, working them to the bone....

THUANH: It's not healthy.

GENN: It's not good for your business, either. Sustainability. That's the word.

THUANH: Yeah, I think for mine too is that we're, I don't think there really are any stories contained in this book that a lot of us, if not most of us, have not encountered. So when a lot of us entered the work force as teenagers or young workers, we worked minimum wage jobs and we had managers who micromanaged us and dehumanized us. We went through personality tests and we got drug tested and our bags searched and in some cases we had to bring clear bags to work so that we could show that we weren't stealing a bunch of stuff.

And you get a sense of solidarity there and community because a lot of people have gone through this and most people aren't doing anything nefarious and are showing up to work in earnest to make a living and to not steal from their employers, or steal time, and are trying to do a good job because in many cases the people that they are serving and interacting with are from the same class as they are.

So it's seeing the humanity of people and trying to dispel the stigma of classes, and showcasing that if you're working there is no such thing as unskilled labor. It doesn't matter what job you are doing. It doesn't define you, first of all, and it doesn't make you better than or less than what you do for money.

So I think there is solidarity in there for us all. If there is any takeaway it's that most of us are more alike than different. We should all fight together to make it better for everybody. Right? It's not an us versus them for the most part.

GENN: Yeah, my book is also very, go undercover and find the humanity around you.

THUANH: Yeah. So thanks for listening.

GENN: Yeah. Thanks for coming. It was really fun.

THUANH: Thanks for the invite. I had a really great time.

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