

Sarah McConnell: The Furious Flower Poetry Center is dedicated to ensuring the visibility and celebration of African American poets. Here's Maya Angelou speaking in 2012 as Furious Flower celebrated Toni Morrison.

Maya Angelou: I am a great respecter and love of Toni Morrison. All those years ago, I read Sula, and I was so moved and strengthened by that book, that in the midst of my misery, I wrote a letter to Toni Morrison. We hadn't even met at the time. But I wrote a letter to her to say thank you for seeing me as an African American woman, seeing me and loving me.

Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell, today celebrating Furious Flower.

Sarah McConnell: Many of the most notable poets in the country will gather in Washington D.C. September 27th and 28th for a two-day gala celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Furious Flower Poetry Center. Joining me in our studios are Joanne Gabbin and Lauren Alleyne. Joanne is the founder and executive director of Furious Flower and a professor of English at James Madison University. Lauren's the assistant director of Furious Flower and also a JMU professor of English. We'll hear the voices and discuss the great African American writers who've been featured by Furious Flower over the years, including among others, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez and Rita Dove.

Sarah McConnell: Joanne, you conceived of Furious Flower 25 years ago. What was your vision then and what do you think it has become?

Joanne Gabbin: Furious Flower started as a tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks. It was a conference that we did in 1994 and because it was such a phenomenal event, it has now become a decade-defining conference for Furious Flower.

Sarah McConnell: Lauren, there will be a 25 Year Gala Anniversary of Furious Flower in Washington D.C. in a couple of weeks. Tell me who you expect to be in attendance there and who that gala will honor.

Lauren Alleyne: So the theme of the gala is Seeding the Future because we're both honoring a rich, 25 year legacy of Furious Flower, but we're also looking to think through what the next 25 years look like. So we have the three former African American Poets Laureate of the United States, Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, and Tracy K. Smith. We also have Terrance Hayes, an amazing poet emceeding the event. We have Elizabeth Alexander who will be doing the opening. And we're thrilled to, also in this vein of seeding the future, have the Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, also a young black woman, joining the event as well. And so this is also an event that celebrates the future in that way.

Sarah McConnell: Over the years, Joanne, you invited With Good Reason to attend these Furious Flower conferences and interview many of the poets. I'm going to play some

highlights from those shows and ask you and Lauren to reflect on each poet and writer.

Sarah McConnell: Here's the first clip. This is Toni Morrison and this was part of Sheer Good Fortune, an event that you and Nikki Giovanni created to bring poets from all over the country to honor Toni Morrison. One of the most moving moments in that interview was when Toni talked about what she hoped her legacy would be.

Toni Morrison: But I have to tell you something. My legacy, to me, I was in London once on stage being interviewed and some women had come from all over, black women, to see me and they were sitting up in the balcony. And I was going on and on with the interviewer and she said, the interviewer said, "How would you like to be remembered?" And I said, "I would like to be remembered as trustworthy. As generous. As loving."

Toni Morrison: So this girl up in the balcony raised her hand and she said, "What are you talking about? You are Toni Morrison. You want to be remembered as trustworthy? As generous?" She was furious. And I was looking up at her and I was thinking, she asked me how did I want to be remembered. I was thinking about my family. She was thinking about the world. I don't care what the world thinks. I want the people who know me to say that they could count on me. And that I was the person whose friendship was of some value. That's good. That's really good. And I don't even care if they read my books. You know in that sense, I like it, but you know it's not important. But I don't think of myself as a legend or there's no legacy. And whatever there is, it'll change in 30 years anyway.

Joanne Gabbin: Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni and I did a tribute to Toni Morrison in 2012 and in that tribute called Sheer Good Fortune, more than 40 authors, singers, poets came to honor her at Virginia Tech. And we were able to give her her flowers while she could smell them. In fact, she said at the end of that program, "If I never have anything like this again in the public for me, this is enough."

Lauren Alleyne: What's amazing about that clip is you get the person shining through. But I never got to meet Toni Morrison, and so I know her through her work. And to me what I can say is that her integrity is in her writing. Her generosity is in her writing. Her belief and love of her people as she saw them and identified them is in her writing, and that is what made her writing excellent and that is what drew so many people, those who didn't get to shake her hand or give her flowers in person, that's what drew us to her. That's what made us love her. And I think that is what will continue to keep her legacy alive.

Sarah McConnell: Another poet honored by Furious Flower as you mentioned, Joanne, was Sonia Sanchez. What should we know about Sonia Sanchez and her contributions to the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement?

Joanne Gabbin: You should know that Sonia Sanchez was one of the first people in the country to teach courses in black literature at San Francisco State. She also was a founding member of what we now call the Black Arts Movement. But it's interesting that when she was a student at Hunter College, she didn't know very much about black literature. It wasn't taught. But after, she had a wonderful encounter with a woman by the name of Jean Hutson, and she talks about how she got into knowing about black literature.

Sarah McConnell: You're recalling this wonderful story by her that starts terribly. She'd applied for a job, had been accepted, and showed up on the first day. This was in New York City at a writing job. And when the boss took one look at her, he said, "I'm sorry, the job has been filled already." Sonia talks about the bus ride home from that encounter and what happened next that changed her life.

Sonia Sanchez: Lo and behold, I saw this sign that said Schomburg Library and there was a man outside smoking a cigarette and I said, "What is the Schomburg?" He said, "Lady, lady, lady, if you want to know what the Schomburg is, just sign this and talk to the lady inside."

Sonia Sanchez: And my dear sister, I walked into this Schomburg with this long, long, long table with nothing but scholars sitting there, black, white scholars sitting there with their heads down in just stacks of books and at the end was a glass enclosed office. And I knocked on the glass door, and the woman came. She was Ms. Jean Hutson who was the curator. And I said, "What is the Schomburg?" And she said, "Oh my dear," she said, "this library has books only by and about black people." And I said with my smart mouth self, I said, "There must not be many books in here." She never let me forget that. And it took her 30 minutes. I'm looking at my watch saying, "What is this woman doing?"

Sonia Sanchez: She brought me three books. On the bottom, Up From Slavery. In the middle, Souls of Black Folk. On the top, Their Eyes Were Watching God. I started to read and as I read, I was crying. And I got maybe about a third, almost a half, and then I eased up and knocked on the door again. And I was crying. I said, "No, but how could I have a degree and call myself an educated young woman, and I haven't read these books?" She said, "Oh my dear," she said, "I am going to give you hundreds and hundreds of books to read."

Sonia Sanchez: I asked her, years later, I asked her, "What did you see in my eyes that would make you grab my hands and help me at that time in my life?" She said, "I saw your thirst for knowledge and I knew that you would help our people."

Joanne Gabbin: That's an incredible story. It's incredible to me because you see the beginning of this creative mind who really understands what it means to be initiated into her blackness. So she goes from there to write books like Homecoming. And Homegirls and Handgrenades. And later on, books like-

Lauren Alleyne: Does Your House Have Lions?

Joanne Gabbin: Yes. And Wounded In the House of a Friend. And Blues for a Blue Black Magical Woman because she has, at that point now, taken all of this from her culture, from the literary legacy that Ms. Hutson introduces her to, and she goes on to create her own literary collection.

Sarah McConnell: Did you read Sonia Sanchez when you were coming up?

Lauren Alleyne: I did not. I'm from Trinidad and Tobago, but I have three degrees from the United States universities and I think what's still tragic is that that experience is not uncommon. It's still happening. You can learn so much about American literature and have this entire, rich, empowering piece of it left out, and I think that's one of the critical gaps that Furious Flower fills.

Joanne Gabbin: And that was the reason I thought about having the conference in the first place in 1994. Because my students at James Madison University were not really exposed to these black writers, especially the black poets. So I believed that we could have a conference bring these wonderful American poets to James Madison University and they would get their first look at black poetry in essence.

Sarah McConnell: One of the early people you brought in was the great Lucille Clifton before she passed away in 2010. Lucille was Poet Laureate of Maryland, twice nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She wasn't a person of many words, and that was reflected in her poetry. And here's this wonderful poem she introduces herself.

Lucille Clifton: I started thinking about Aunt Jemima and all those people and speaking in their voices. And this is Aunt Jemima.

Lucille Clifton: White folks say I remind them of home. I who have been homeless all my life, except for their kitchen cabinets. I, who have made the best of everything. Pancakes, batter for chicken, my life. The shelf on which I sit between the flour and cornmeal is thick with dreams. Oh how I long for my own syrup, rich as blood. My true nephews, my nieces, my kitchen, my family, my home.

Joanne Gabbin: You see her taking off of the stereotype of Aunt Jemima, the stereotype that was commercially successful in the American market with Aunt Jemima's syrup. But she's putting the guts behind that stereotype and making you see the woman who stands in the kitchen, who cooks for the white people, who does not have the opportunity to cook for her own family because she's there with them. So she uses language in such a sophisticated way that you see all these levels.

Lauren Alleyne: Absolutely. I think that was probably one of the things that Ms. Lucille's poems best did was to both have fun, poke fun, and be irreverent towards power or what is assumed to be power, right? And I think that, yeah, that was something that she did really well.

Sarah McConnell: One of the women who will be at the gala in D.C. on September 27th-28th is Natasha Trethewey, appointed United States Poet Laureate in 2012. Again in 2013 for a second time. This is her poem about a cross burning she remembers as a child. It's called Incident.

Natasha T: We tell the story every year. How we peered from the windows, shades drawn, though nothing really happened. The charred grass now green again. We peered from the windows, shades drawn, at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree. The charred grass still green. Then we darkened our rooms. Lit the hurricane lamps. At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree, a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns. We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps, the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil. It seemed the angles had gathered, white men in their gowns. When they were done, they left quietly. No one came. The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil. By morning, the flames had all dimmed. When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came. Nothing really happened. By morning all the flames had dimmed. We tell the story every year.

Joanne Gabbin: This poem is so interesting to me because it looks backward, but it also looks forward because we are experiencing in this country a spate of terrorism that is gripping our nation. And she talks about the clan, but we have already experienced in our own country, in Charlottesville, in other places, the rise of white supremacy. So here it's a poem that, unfortunately, still has meaning today.

Lauren Alleyne: It's shocking. I have a poem in my collection that came out this April that is also about a cross burning that happened when I lived in Dubuque, Iowa in 2016. And so, there's still so much work to do.

Sarah McConnell: You're also honoring another U.S. Poet Laureate on September 27-28. This is Rita Dove. Let's hear a poem from Rita herself, a poem she calls Family Reunion.

Rita Dove: Thirty seconds into the barbecue, my Cleveland cousins have everyone speaking Southern. Broadened vowels and dropped consonants, whoops and caws. It's more osmosis than magic. A sliding thrall back to the time when working the tire factories meant entire neighborhoods coming up from Georgia or Tennessee, accents helplessly intact. While their children, inflections flattened to match the field they thought they were playing on, knew without asking when it was safe to roll out a drawl. Just as it's understood potluck means resurrecting the food we've abandoned along the way for the sake of sleeker thighs.

Rita Dove: I look over the yard to the porch with this battalion of aunts, the wavering ranks of uncles at the grill, everywhere else hoards of progeny are swirling and my cousins yakking on as if they were waist-deep in quick sand, but like the books recommend, aren't moving until someone yanks them free. Who are all these children? Who had them and with whom? Through the general coffee tones, the shamed genetics cut a creamy swath. Cherokee's burnt umber transposed onto generous lips. A glance flaring gray above the crushed nose we label

Anonymous African. It's all here, the beautiful geometry of Mendel's peas and their grim logic. And though we remain clearly divided on the merits of okra, there's still time to demolish the cheese grits and tear into slow-cooked ribs so tender we agree they're worth the extra pound or two our menfolk swear will always bring them home. Pity the poor soul who lives a life without butter. Those pinched knees and tennis shoulders and hatchety smiles.

Joanne Gabbin: One of the joys of being involved in Furious Flower for so many years, for 25 years, is that I remember the audience reaction after she read that poem. And it takes me back to the very first Furious Flower conference. Gwendolyn Brooks specifically asked for Rita Dove to be there, and Rita Dove told me that she couldn't be there because of an appointment she had as Poet Laureate. But Gwendolyn Brooks would not accept that as an answer, and she said, "Oh no, Rita Dove has to be there."

Joanne Gabbin: And so I called Rita and said, "Gwendolyn Brooks says you have to be there." And she was there. And so I remember that Friday when Rita Dove read just before Gwendolyn Brooks came on the stage and it was just one of those moments of triumph because you saw this woman who was the first Pulitzer Prize Winner, who was African American woman, an African American, and here this woman who was now the Poet Laureate of the United States, honoring each other.

Sarah McConnell: And what a great moment to introduce Maya Angelou. Let's hear from Maya Angelou who had joined you and Nikki in that 2012 celebration of Toni Morrison. This is Maya speaking about Furious Flower at that celebration.

Maya Angelou: I'm so honored. I like very much having an attitude of gratitude. I'm grateful to be here with my sister-friend, Toni Morrison. My Lord. My Lord. I mean, she and I are in the same age group, more or less. And you know, growing old is not for sissies. Thank the Lord neither Toni Morrison nor I is a sissy. We're still kicking it.

Maya Angelou: But to see, look around and see Rita Dove, my Lord. And Mari Evans. And Nikki Giovanni. My land, just to see Sonia Sanchez. What you say? I mean just look at these darling girls. And that's what they are to me. There's a world of difference, you know, between being an old female and being a woman. Yeah. It's like being a man. Being a man is no small matter. You can be an old male. But to be a man, you know when you're in the room with a man, you're all right. You're not going to be abused. You're not going to be called out of your name. It's amazing.

Maya Angelou: And so when I look around and see these young girls, and they will become older women, they will take responsibility, they will be certain to be great citizens in their country, I am a great respecter and love of Toni Morrison. All those years ago, I read Sula, and I was so moved and entranced, enchanted, and strengthened by that book, that in the midst of my misery, I wrote a letter to Toni Morrison. We hadn't even met at the time. But I wrote a letter to her to say

thank you for seeing me as an African American woman, seeing me and loving me.

Joanne Gabbin: Maya Angelou shows you there why so many people love her because she emphasizes the love that she has for her women friends, and the love that we have for her. Maya wanted Toni to know that Toni Morrison wrote the book that was her story, *The Bluest Eye*. She mentioned there *Sula*, and *Sula* is about two girls who have this bond, this friendship, that is almost eternal. So we have here this combining of sisterly love with the love for her people.

Lauren Alleyne: What I hear in that is at the core of *Furious Flower's* spirit, which is a sense of, what really binds us is love. That love manifests itself most powerfully when we support each other, when we acknowledge each other, and when we see each other. Maya Angelou's seeing not only her sister-friend, Toni Morrison, but also these, quote, unquote, young girls, you know, these younger writers. We're seeing a passing of the torch, a blessing of the next generation, a seeding of the future. And I think that, creating a space where that can thrive is part of really what Joanne has built over the last 25 years.

Sarah McConnell: And speaking of that next generation, you have just come out with a collection of your own poetry called *Honeyfish*. And would you please read from *Honeyfish* for us?

Lauren Alleyne: Thank you, absolutely. I'm going to read the title poem, which is called *Honeyfish*.

Lauren Alleyne: The catch is so fresh, each bite is blue. The sea still in it and settling on your tongue like prayer. This is what it means to eat, you think. To abandon utensils for the grace of fingers, to hold flesh against flesh, hands slick with what will become inseparable from your own thrumming body. As a child, you loved fry dry, the small fish you ate whole and imagined them swimming in you, your belly full as an ocean. Now, you know better. That nothing consumed lives on as before. When the bone, thin as a wish, lodges itself in the pink flesh of your mouth, refuses offerings of bread or water, becomes an ache that will not be moved, you understand this is what it means to be a body. That what is taken in takes root in ways beyond your choosing. A single bite, and you carry the ocean in your throat.

Joanne Gabbin: Lauren's poem is a good example of what you'll hear at the 25th anniversary of *Furious Flower*. We have 25 poets, some of whom are young poets who will be reading at that celebration. We also, fortunately, have a book coming out called *Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*. And we have a hundred such emerging poets. The gala will be at the Grand Hyatt and the program of celebration will be at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. And we are so grateful to the leadership there for allowing us to be in this signature venue.

- Sarah McConnell: Well, Joanne Gabbin and Lauren Alleyne, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.
- Lauren Alleyne: Thank you so much for having us, Sarah.
- Joanne Gabbin: Thank you, it's been a pleasure.
- Sarah McConnell: Joanne Gabbin is the founder and executive director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University. Lauren Alleyne is the assistant director of Furious Flower. Joanne and Lauren are also English professors at James Madison University.
- Sarah McConnell: The music on this show featured some of the giants of the jazz world. For a complete list of the music, go to our website, withgoodreasonradio.org. We'll be right back.
- Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, welcome back to With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Pulitzer Prize Winning Poet Yusef Komunyakaa is perhaps best known for his poetry about the Vietnam War. He discovered poetry as a child in Bogalusa, Louisiana, where he was inspired by the southern landscape, the Old Testament cadences he heard in church, and jazz music.
- Yusef K: I love my big hands. I love it clear down to the soft, quick motor of each breath. The liver's ten kinds of desire and the kidney's lust for sugar.
- Sarah McConnell: Komunyakaa recently collaborated on a new jazz album called White Dust.
- Yusef K: Because I was born to wear out at least one hundred angels.
- Sarah McConnell: Yusef Komunyakaa was the guest of honor at a week long seminar at James Madison University's Furious Flower Poetry Center hosted by Dr. Joanne Gabbin. I spoke with him there about his life and work.
- Sarah McConnell: Yusef, let me ask you where you are now in your work. Are you resting? Or working on something new?
- Yusef K: I am excited about something new because recently I've been writing plays and I admire playwrights who have been influenced by poetry. And I'm working on a book-length poem entitled The Last Bohemian of Avenue A. And that poem is really a monologue spoken by a jazz musician who's been in New York for a very long time. And he has, in a certain sense, thought a lot about the world and how he has been shaped by his travels, by his experiences and imagination.
- Sarah McConnell: Give me a little for instance, a taste of some of this discovery that he didn't realize he had.

Yusef K: The summers I lived in Georgia with Great Grandma and Grandpa, railroad tracks divided the town. And I've seen men swinging lanterns to signal the big switch engines. Stop and go, grew, thundering, clang and the coupling of great animals. To this day sometimes driven under a tomb brings me back to trains running through pines and oaks, churning slowly out of an oblivion of sun on dogwood at the days of a downpour. And I play everything I am. I don't know sometimes where my words come from. Last Saturday I was on a train, headed for a candlelight gig and it was crowded. My case touched this guy next to me and he pushed me. I almost lost my cool, but I said, "You can tell me if my horn is touching your shoulder and I'll say, sir, I'm sorry. You have eyes and ears. You look like a human."

Sarah McConnell: You began in Louisiana, you were born in Louisiana, but you've lived in so many different parts of the country-

Yusef K: Yes.

Sarah McConnell: How long in New York now?

Yusef K: I took a position there at NYU in 2006. But I had been visiting New York for some time. I'd been going to New York for shows, going to New York to be surprised by those around me.

Sarah McConnell: Going to New York for shows. That is what has inspired your desire to write plays.

Yusef K: Well, actually, I've always loved reading plays. Especially playwrights that I think have been informed by poetry. Beckett is a good example. Harold Pinter. Adrienne Kennedy, such an interesting playwright because her plays sort of spoken with poetic, not diction as much as poetic tension. So, so I'm there, I'm there with her. I have a play entitled Foreclosure. It's a play that deals with two officers who have been acquitted for the shooting of a young black man.

Sarah McConnell: What an incredible area to tackle in these years where video has brought us just right to the moment of these terrible interactions-

Yusef K: Yes.

Sarah McConnell: Between African Americans and police officers.

Yusef K: That's right. And it's not new. That's the tragedy.

Sarah McConnell: It's surprisingly new for a lot of white people.

Yusef K: Yes.

Sarah McConnell: Have you been surprised by the shock on the part of white people to seeing these videos?

Yusef K: I have been surprised because it is something that I've known since I was a teenager. Even before that, when I think about it. Because in my psyche is this World War II veteran who comes back to Louisiana, and he had been affected by war, World War II. And he'd also been wounded. I think he had a steel plate in his head, and we called him Mr. Dan. And he was actually beaten to death by a policeman. Of course, the community was surprised by that. And of course, because of his mental capacity at the war, he came back a damaged soul. We tried to rationalize what had happened.

Yusef K: The real problem is class. And we don't talk about class. That is still there with us and will probably be there with us for a very long time. The idea of class tricks us. We like to become dreamers. We think that class is going to be removed. A good example for education. But I am really disturbed by the fact that so many young people owe so much money for their education, when in fact there are countries where the citizens receive free education because it's an investment in the future.

Sarah McConnell: And you should know because when you returned from Vietnam, you were able to walk through that college door because of the G.I. Bill.

Yusef K: Yes. Yes.

Sarah McConnell: I've heard one person say the G.I. Bill revolutionized education in this country.

Yusef K: I think so. I didn't even know that I wanted to go to college. However, I'd been reading a lot and there's that impromptu moment where I find myself writing the application. That was a moment of relief. It was also a moment of freedom.

Sarah McConnell: Help me understand why you didn't think college was the next step for you when you graduated from high school in Bogalusa, Louisiana.

Yusef K: Well, I had other dreams. I remember my very first dream was to, I drew hundreds of greenhouses. I was fascinated with plants.

Sarah McConnell: Well, you had farmers in the family.

Yusef K: Yes, yes, yes. But the whole thing of grass and shrubs and things of that sort, and just watching things grow, that there's a certain kind of vitality in that. I would just escape in the woods. And that was a place where I think I discovered poetry.

Sarah McConnell: Didn't I read that when you were living in New Orleans, you thought of your first poem about your Vietnam experiences? I read you were on a ladder, you would

think of a line, climb down the ladder, scribble it out, go back up to what you were doing.

Yusef K: Yes. Yes, yes. It was a really surprising moment for me. And in retrospect, I think it had a lot to do with the fact that it was happening in August and there was a lot of dust and debris in the house, and somewhere in my psyche there was a poem entitled Somewhere Near Phu Bai And I started writing that poem, and all the other poems came forth.

Sarah McConnell: Were you drafted? And were you afraid to fight?

Yusef K: I wasn't drafted. I joined the Army and I added a year. I wasn't afraid to fight. Let's face it, growing up in the South, being completely shaped by that experience, I had a knowledge of guns. Probably too much of a knowledge of guns.

Sarah McConnell: When you arrived in Vietnam, was it terrifying or could you make your way?

Yusef K: It was a dangerous place. But what was interesting was the landscape. I thought I knew that landscape by growing up in Louisiana. The vibrancy. Drop a seed, it grows. Cut the grass down, and it's up the next week. You know, if I had grown up in a city, I think I would have really felt threatened by Vietnam. Not the snipers hiding in the grass as much as the landscape itself.

Sarah McConnell: We just have time for one more thought, let me leave it to you to talk to us a little bit about the meaning of poetry and the power of it to you.

Yusef K: When Plato bans the poet from his ideal republic, there's a reason. Poets tend to trouble the water. They pose questions. And that is the power of poetry.

Sarah McConnell: Yusef, thank you for sharing your thoughts with me on With Good Reason.

Yusef K: Thank you much.

Sarah McConnell: Pulitzer Prize Winning Poet Yusef Komunyakaa was the guest of honor at a week long seminar at James Madison University's Furious Flower Poetry Center hosted by Dr. Joanne Gabbin.

Sarah McConnell: Coming up next, the author of Sargent's Women.

Sarah McConnell: The painter John Singer Sargent immortalized the high society men and women of the Gilded Age. Think Titanic or Edith Wharton's Age of Innocence. It was a time when there were strict rules about social behaviors, but also a time when obscene wealth meant you might be able to get away with breaking those rules. In Sargent's Women: Four Lives Behind the Canvas, author Donna Lucey tells the stories of four of the fabulously wealthy women whose lives were painted by

John Singer Sargent. Lucy is media editor of Encyclopedia Virginia at Virginia Humanities.

Sarah McConnell: I'm so struck by the four women and their portraits that you focused on in your book. Let's start with Elizabeth, who's on the cover, beautiful and yet sad.

Donna Lucey: Yes, this is Elizabeth Chanler. She was one of the famous so-called Astor orphans. She was orphaned at the age of 11. She was marooned on an island, the Isle of Wight. She was at this very grim boarding school at the time, and she was left there, the guardians who were overseeing the orphans wouldn't permit her to come home.

Sarah McConnell: So how did she come to walk into his studio?

Donna Lucey: Her sister commissioned the portrait because they were in London at the wedding of her brother. And when you look at that portrait, you would think it would be a happy portrait because this was a happy time in her life. And at this point, she was a young woman. She was only 27 years old. But at 27, she was more or less considered over the hill in terms of she wasn't married yet. She was an unmarried woman.

Sarah McConnell: My favorite, my personal favorite painting, is the one of Elsie. She just looks so contemporary, but stark and unsmiling. Who is Elsie?

Donna Lucey: This was a painting that took him forever to do because he was capturing adolescence and every time he looked at her, she would be changing.

Sarah McConnell: She looks a little like the, sort of, the Jane Eyre character who's been hidden away in the attic.

Donna Lucey: Absolutely, absolutely. That's a perfect analogy. Really. And where she was, was this incredible place. It's this moated medieval manor house called Ightham Mote, a wonderful place in Kent. It was painted in the old medieval chapel there.

Sarah McConnell: Who is Elsie? And how did her family come to have such a fortune?

Donna Lucey: Elsie's father was a Civil War general and a great railroad magnate. He founded the town of Colorado Springs. And her mother was very sickly, and so she made Elsie her confidant in a kind of cruel way. She would tell her that she was going to die and that she was going to have to take over the care of her two younger sisters, which led her at a very early age to be older than she really was.

Sarah McConnell: Later she's seduced by a painter who is married to her mother's best friend.

- Donna Lucey: Yes, yes. Peter Harrison. What a cad he was. And he ends up stringing along, they have this very passionate love affair, much of which takes place through passionate, intense letters.
- Sarah McConnell: Where he said, "Yes, I'm married, but just the mere thought of you. I can't live without you. You have to come with me. We have to go some place together where people won't see us."
- Donna Lucey: And they do at one point. They go to New York. And they have this marvelous time. But then of course, he falls in love with her younger sister, Dos. And then he betrays Elsie in the cruelest way possible. He asks if Dos can come visit him in England, and then when she's there, he writes this letter saying, "And now I have her." And then the letters to Elsie stop.
- Sarah McConnell: After she loses her father and her mother, what does she do? She does eventually marry.
- Donna Lucey: Yes. Well, poor Elsie. She goes back, after her mother dies, they go back to the house in Colorado Springs called Glen Eyrie, which is this other fabulous place. And she basically then has to take care of her father because her father has a terrible accident on a horse and he becomes a quadriplegic. And so then she becomes the nurse maid to him, and he's this very domineering figure.
- Sarah McConnell: One of the four women that you focused on in the portrait is not of her, but of her sister.
- Donna Lucey: Yes, yes.
- Sarah McConnell: So there were Sally and Lucia Fairchild of Boston. Sally is the beautiful sister and Sargent's very taken with her. And he does, perhaps, the most extraordinary painting in your book. Let's take a look at it. This is a beautiful woman whose face is entirely enveloped in a light blue veil. You can't see her face.
- Donna Lucey: No. And she was astonishingly beautiful. And she knew it. She was quite haughty. She was the beautiful sister, the one, chosen one. And she was 21 when he did this portrait of her, and she's on the beach at Nahant in Massachusetts. It's a very, very trendy resort for the ultra Brahmin class of Boston.
- Sarah McConnell: Lucia Fairchild bucks her wealthy family and marries a fellow artist that they disapprove of. But ends up, you write, always struggling financially to support him. He's kind of a loser it turns out when it comes to love and marriage. And they also live for a time in a wild artists' colony in New Hampshire.
- Donna Lucey: Yes, yes the great Cornish Colony, which is this fabulous bohemian place where artists of every stripe came and headed by the great sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens. It was a kind of bohemian wife-swapping, everyone became models

for everyone else's husbands and then they all began to sleep with one another and there was lots of drinking and carousing. And all the local farmers would shake their heads and say things were much calmer in their own households.

Sarah McConnell: But the theater performances at night were fabulous.

Donna Lucey: Yes yes yes. I mean the theater was part of the bones of that place. They put on these theatrical productions. Ethel Barrymore was there. It was a kind of *Midsummer Night's Dream* set in New Hampshire. One of the great finds in doing my books was that the Boston Athenaeum, this great old library in Boston, there's a photograph at Nahant, which was the spot where he had painted Sally. And in the background, you can see, Sargent is sitting in the foreground and in the background, you can see Lucia, the ugly duckling sister who's been overlooked and who's not being painted. And she's there taking notes. She was following him around taking notes about him in a secret diary. Everything he said she would write down. She adored him. And because of Sargent she decided to become an artist.

Sarah McConnell: All of these lives, Elizabeth, Elsie, Lucia, and Isabella. They're all unfolding against the background of the Gilded Age. Was this a transitional moment for women in particular?

Donna Lucey: Oh absolutely. They were becoming better educated. They were suddenly being allowed into schools. And these particular women who lived in this upper echelon of society, they had the money to do great things like help start all of the great art institutions in the country. They were just beginning to break out of the conventions of the society that they lived in. These women wrote 20, 30 page handwritten letters every day with allusions to classical mythology, to the books they were reading, to the great theater performances they were attending, to music. They all loved music. Wagner was the huge rage. And they were transported by this. All of this was critical to their souls. So these particular women were not your standard socialites. There were, as you might imagine in the Gilded Age because there was some much money sloshing around, lots of the women were just vapid social climbers and only cared about their ball gowns and how much they cost and how big their husbands' steam yachts were and how large their, quote, cottages were in Newport, which would be 60, 70 room cottages. But these women didn't care about those things. And that's why I chose them.

Sarah McConnell: You write that reading their stories was a bit like reading Gilded Age porn. Were they really that scandalous?

Donna Lucey: Well, yes, they were actually. These letters were very steamy. In many of these stories, in fact I think in every one of the stories, there are illicit love affairs. And there's something very sexy about waiting for your lover's letters and you have to hide them and you have to go to some corner somewhere to read them. And

you're waiting for the postman to come. And they're written on beautiful stationary with family crests and hotels from the places all over the world.

Sarah McConnell: They're also heartbreaking insights into timeless truths about love and marriage.

Donna Lucey: Oh absolutely. Well especially because diaries are not written for other people to read.

Sarah McConnell: Could you tell?

Donna Lucey: Oh yes, yes, yes. And I've spent my career, actually, reading women's diaries.

Sarah McConnell: You know, the women you write about are mostly young. Do you see lessons for young women of today in their stories?

Donna Lucey: Absolutely because this is a book about young women. And unfortunately, some of the same problems that these Gilded Age women ran into, women today still have. They're up against a male dominated society. They have all kinds of restrictions about, or expectations I should say, from family, from society in general. And we're still fighting these same battles.

Sarah McConnell: Donna Lucey is the author of Sargent's Women: Four Lives Behind the Canvas. Lucey is media editor for Encyclopedia Virginia at Virginia Humanities.

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Sarah McConnell: I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.