

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

[Soundbyte from Valeria's lecture]

"How do you explain that it's never inspiration that drives you to tell a story, but rather a combination of anger and clarity? How do you say: No, we don't find inspiration here, but we find a country that is as beautiful as it is broken, and we are somehow now a part of it, so we are also broken with it and feel ashamed, confused, and sometimes hopeless. And we're trying to figure out how to do something about all that."

Rebecca Hoogs, Host

What drives storytelling? What is the story—who gets to tell it—and how? In a twist on the American road trip genre, Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* explores these tensions. As an artist couple and their children embark on trip from New York to Arizona, wrestling with their family's crisis, a bigger one comes to them through the car radio: that of the tens of thousands of unaccompanied Central American and Mexican children arriving in the U.S. without papers.

I'm Rebecca Hoogs, the Associate Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures—and you're listening to *SAL/on air*, a collection of engaging talks from the world's best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures.

Author Valeria Luiselli was born in Mexico City and grew up in South Korea, South Africa and India. She was only able to write her new novel, she tells us, after writing a work of non-fiction first, *Tell Me How It Ends*. That book, a polemic about the US-Mexico border, is structured around the 40 questions that she translated and asked undocumented children facing deportation as a volunteer court translator. After Valeria's talk about these two works she's joined by Florangela Davila, news director at the Seattle-Tacoma NPR station, KNKX, for a Q&A. This event took place at Benaroya Hall in April of 2019.

This is *SAL/on air*.

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Valeria Luiselli

Hi, everyone, thanks for being here. Oh shit, there's a lot of people. [Audience laughs].

It's a beautiful night outside. So, thanks for being inside here. I hope that this lecture and the conversation that follows takes you to other places as well as we sit here. I am going to start with a short reading. I'm going to be reading a little bits and pieces from both *Tell Me How It Ends* and *Lost Children Archive*, which are two books that are deeply connected.

"We are driving across Oklahoma in early July when we first hear about the wave of children arriving, alone and undocumented, at the border. On our long west--bound drives we begin to follow the story on the radio. It's a sad story that hits so close to home and yet seems completely unimaginable, almost unreal: tens of thousands of children from Mexico and

Central America have been detained at the border. Nothing is clear in the initial coverage of the situation—which soon becomes known, more widely, as an immigration crisis, though others will advocate for the more accurate term ‘refugee crisis.’

As we drive from southwestern New Mexico toward Arizona, it becomes more and more difficult to ignore the uncomfortable irony of it. We're traveling in the direction opposite the children whose stories we are now following so closely. As we get closer to the border and begin taking back roads, we do not see a single migrant, child or adult. We see other things though, that indicate their ghostly presence, past or future. Along the narrow dirt road in New Mexico that goes from a ghost town called Shakespeare to another town called Animas, we see a trail of flags that volunteer groups tied to trees or fences, indicating that there are tanks filled with water there for people to drink as they cross the desert. Occasionally, we're overtaken by big pickup trucks. And it's hard not to imagine the men behind their steering wheels: big men; vigilant, patriotic men who carry pistols and rifles by constitutional right, and feel entitled to use them if they see a group of aliens walking in the desert.

We approach Animas; we also begin to see fleeting herds of border patrol cars, like ominous white stallions racing across the horizon. We decide not to tell anyone in diners and gas stations that we're Mexican, just in case. But we're stopped a few times by Border Patrol officials and have to show our passports and display big smiles when we explain we're just writers and just on vacation. We have to confirm that, yes, we are writers, even if yes, we're also Mexican. Why are we there? And what are we writing? They always want to know.

'We're writing a Western sir.'

That's what we tell them, that we're writing a Western. [Audience laughs]. We also tell them that we came to Arizona for the open skies and the silence and the emptiness. The second part, more true than the part about writing the Western, which is not true. [Audience laughs]. Handing back our passports, one official says sardonically:

'So you come all the way down here for the inspiration.'

We know better than to contradict anyone who carries a badge and a gun. So we just say:

'Yes, sir.'

Because how do you explain that it's never inspiration that drives you to tell a story, but rather a combination of anger and clarity? How do you say: No, we don't find inspiration here, but we find a country that is as beautiful as it is broken, and we are somehow now a part of it, so we are also broken with it and feel ashamed, confused, and sometimes hopeless. And we're trying to figure out how to do something about all that."

So, I wrote that sometime in 2015. And I'm still trying to figure out how to do something about all that. I went on a road trip with my family in 2014. I was trying to write a novel than about

growing up in post-apartheid South Africa in the 1990s and thought that I could use the road trip as a space to think about my childhood in the '90s. I thought that the long drives and looking at maps and thinking about childhood would allow me to write this, but turns out, I'm not exactly the type of writer that can vacuum-pack herself against the immediate present and then just conjure the past or conjure fiction.

So, what actually happened on that trip is I began documenting, very meticulously, the things that we saw. And I began documenting, more particularly, a kind of sense of a landscape of abandonment. Right, an America that I did not know. And that somehow was in contradiction to the way that I had seen it through its documentation by previous generations, by Kerouac, on his road trip novels, by Robert Frank and his photographic documentation of America.

What I saw and what I documented was the America of abandoned motels, of abandoned toys, and front yards of abandoned water towers, and diners and people, and never shopping malls, they're never abandoned. And I also started documenting the vastness and the relative emptiness of - the very beautiful emptiness - of the landscape, those electric thunderstorms that surprise you in the middle of driving along a highway and somehow electrify your eye sockets and your brain. The landscapes of the deserts with their creosote and jojoba and cholla, bushes kind of spreading out like prickly beauty into my native Mexico.

I documented the military posts and the hovering military planes that are always landing somewhere, who knows why and what for, and the landscape of industrial farming as well, right? This land gang-raped by heavy machinery to extract resources, resources, resources. And as I let, as I documented the landscape, I also began documenting the soundscape around me, right? First of all, the accents changing in varying accents, the conversations in diners, the questions we got from strangers, why are you here? Where are you from? And then the soundscape also of the family lexicon. What happens in the very particular space of a family enclosed in a car, two kids at the backseat asking weird-ass questions such as, who was the first person who milked a cow? [Audience laughs]. Or do the talking heads have hair? [Audience laughs]. Or, was Oklahoma part of Mexico? Was Arizona part of Mexico? Yes, it was. Who were the blue coats? Who were the white eyes?

And as I documented the family soundscape, the language of the world started coming in as well into our enclosed space of privacy and relative aloneness. It came in through the radio, that we are very devoted listeners of, and what we heard mostly on the radio was what was happening that summer at the border, the crisis that then came to be known as the immigration or the refugee crisis. I'm going to read a little bit, a more tiny fragment, from the novel now, not from the essay, precisely about - or that somehow reproduces - this collapsing of family lexicon into political discourse or vice versa, political discourse, somehow penetrating the family soundscape.

"No one thinks of the children arriving here now as refugees of a hemispheric war that extends at least from these very mountains, down across the country, into southern U.S. and northern Mexico, sweeping across the Mexican deserts, sierras, forests, and southern rain forests into

Guatemala, into El Salvador, and all the way into the Celaque Mountains in Honduras. No one thinks of those children as consequences of a historical war that goes back decades. Everyone keeps asking: Which war? Where? Why are they here? Why do they come to the United States? What will we do with them? No one is asking, why did they flee their homes?

'Why can't we just go back home,' asks the boy in the backseat? He's fidgeting with his Polaroid camera, learning how to handle it, reading the instructions, grunting. 'There's nothing to take pictures of any way,' he complains. 'Everything we pass is old and ugly and looks haunted.'

'Is that true? Is everything haunted?' asks the girl.

'No, baby, I say. Nothing is haunted.' But perhaps, in a way, it is. The deeper we drive into this land, the more I feel like I'm looking at remains and ruins. As we pass an abandoned dairy farm, the boy asks, 'Imagine the first person that ever milked a cow. What a strange person.'

[Audience laughs]. 'Why?' Zoophilia, I think, but I don't say it.

I don't know what my husband thinks. But he doesn't say anything either. The girl suggests that maybe the first cow milker thought that if he pulled hard enough down there, the bell around the cow's neck would ding dong. [Audience laughs].

'Chime.' The boy corrects her. 'It's chime.' And then suddenly milk came out she concludes, ignoring her brother.

Adjusting the mirror, I see her, an ample smile at once serene and mischievous. A slightly more reasonable explanation comes to me. Maybe it was a human mother who had no milk to give her baby. So, then she decided to take it from the cow. But the children are not convinced. A mother with no milk. That's crazy, Mama. That's preposterous, Mama, please."

Now, as we continue driving days and days and days on the road, the kids naturally started to get a little bit anxious and demanding of more kids' stuff, time. And so, the options weren't many, and they were kind of freaky, like UFO museums and things like that. And we ended up going for something that turned out to be not freaky, but deeply horrifying, which were the reenactment towns of the border. So I don't know about you, but reenactment is something that I find particularly bizarre, just this cultural practice of playing a fragment of history, relevant or completely irrelevant, such as a gunfight between Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, over and over and over again in this town where it happened, but it keeps on happening over and over again.

And it's this kind of tool or event halfway between art form and, I guess, product of mass consumption, roughly pedagogic, and we ended up in Tombstone, looking at, or watching this bizarre gunfight between I think, Billy the Kid and Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp, and they all killed each other - or they all shot at each other and nothing, maybe no one got killed - and I got really, at some point, I got really annoyed.

It was my 33rd birthday, so I felt kind of entitled to alone time. And so, I left and I ended up smoking a cigarette (I don't smoke anymore) with Billy the Kid. [Audience laughs]. And we had a lovely conversation, Billy the Kid and I, until another Billy the Kid arrived. And that kind of blew some neurons in me, I mean Billy the Kid, Billy the Kid, I realized that the entire town was full of Billy the Kids and full of Wyatt Earps reproducing, reproducing the scenes, and that it was perfectly possible for Billy the Kid to meet Billy the Kid.

And so, we talked a bit more. They told me about the very difficult conditions of being a reenactor, about the very low pay. They said it's like, not even \$30,000 a year to play Billy the Kid over and over. So, one of them, they told me about one guy who did Mickey Mouse in Disneyland, half the year, which pays really well, to be able to then do Wyatt Earp in Tombstone, Arizona.

And then, the last - I reunited my family at the end of this horrific but very interesting day at the end. And we the kids wanted to take one of those really cheesy family pictures, all like, fake sepia, dressed in the costumes of back then, and they give us a menu to choose from: we could be Billy the Kid, more Billy the Kid, or Wyatt Earp or Doc Holliday, or generic outlaw Mexican, or generic Native American. And then I thought, huh, okay, of course this is what it's about, right? Reenactment is about underlining who gets a name in history? Who gets mapped into the story and who gets mapped out? Who gets to have a name and who gets to be some kind of, like, ornamental lettuce on the side of the plate, right?

So anyway, I dressed as something, I think it was outlaw Mexican. And we all chose our different costumes with our varying degrees of nationalism, post-nationalism, youth, age, etc. And that was it. And I began thinking about reenactment, not only really about reenactment as this very bizarre cultural practice, but also about reenactment as a more internal process, right, as a way of bringing history closer to one through playing it through, playing with it, right, a kind of almost philosophical or hermeneutical jump of bringing what seems very far closer.

And as I began thinking of that, I also noticed that our children in the backseat were, in fact, always reenacting what they heard, be it on the radio, or in the conversations that we heard or had, and they were mixing it all up. So, they mix bluecoats with border patrol, in their minds it was the same thing. And like, the Chiricahua Apaches and the Eagle Warriors with what they call the group of lost children coming into the U.S. without parents, looking for some form of asylum.

That's, I think, where there was a twist, or where there was a spark. And there was a novel, a seed of a novel at least, right, and I knew that I had to write a novel in which political reality and the private sphere of family life collapsed into each other. Because I think we've learned, if not many years ago, some of you definitely after the 2016 elections, that politics affects our private lives much more than we maybe thought, that our private life is, is not private, that we are fundamentally modified and affected by what goes on around us, even if it's not our particular

community, that seems to be the object of political violence, right. But when there is political violence, the tissue of social interaction is hurt, and therefore, everyone is hurt.

So, I started thinking about how, how to write about this exodus, and this political crisis, while at the same time writing about family life, and how a family absorbs the shocks of politics. So, we went back to New York. When we went back to New York at the end of the summer, I started working as a volunteer interpreter and as an interviewer for children who had just arrived in the U.S. and were seeking asylum.

Now, I'm sure most of you know but I'll very, very quickly summarize what was really going on. That summer, 2014, there had been a peak, or a surge, of arrivals of children, undocumented and unaccompanied. Between October of 2013 and that summer of 2014, 80,000 children had arrived alone at the border. And so, the immigration crisis was declared not so much on the basis of the crisis, the humanitarian crisis, that that implied, but on the basis of the institutional crisis that that implied. What the Obama administration did back then was to declare all the children that were seeking asylum as part of the priority docket, basically a group of cases that have priority in court to be seen and resolved before other cases.

What that meant in practice, although it sounds maybe like a good thing, was not a good thing at all. It basically meant that kids who were seeking asylum and traditionally had had one year to get a lawyer to defend them against deportation now only had 21 days. So, you tell me which kid, undocumented, most probably with an undocumented family in the U.S, or a family member, is going to find a lawyer in such a short amount of time. So, volunteers across the country arrived in courts, or into nonprofit organizations, that just sped up the process of finding lawyers for these kids. And I ended up in that process. I ended up translating for kids and interviewing them through a series of questions from a questionnaire put together by nonprofits.

And at the same time, as all of this happened, I continue to write this novel. And what happened - I should have maybe predicted it but I didn't - was that I started using the novel as a kind of vessel, or a depository for my political frustration, anger, confusion. I started using it as a space, as well, into, in which to reproduce some of the testimonies that I was hearing in court.

Until I noticed that I was writing a horrible novel and was also not doing justice to the subject matter, because I hadn't found the right narrative distance and was just using, using it as something, as an instrument for a specific end. And so, I stopped writing it. And I wrote *Tell Me How it Ends*, a very straightforward, short essay that follows the questions that children were asked in the priority docket, and somehow through that, offers both an X-ray of the American immigration system - at least in what pertains this particular exodus - and as well a panorama of the exodus of these years, that continues, of course, into today.

And once I did that, I was able to go back to the novel and not think of it as some kind of political hammer with which to bang your heads, which you'd have hated, and I did too. I think of it as what a novel is, right, which is a space, a slice of life in which people make love and fight

and pee and think and exist, right. So, the novel became that, as well as a space in which to question how the hell do we document political violence, political crises of the present? Through fiction? What kind of instrument is fiction? How does fiction enter into a conversation with a present and add anything of value to it?

At some point, there I was contacted by a radio producer who wanted me to do a radio thing about all of this. And at first, I was interested in the idea, until one day they told me that they wanted to record real voices of real kids, simulating an interview in the court and I said, well, reenactment? [Audience laughs]. Like, what is this, like, going to reenact? And I said, No, no, no, this is exactly what I don't want to do. This is what I don't want my books to do, which is sort of to reenact in this way, appropriate, ornament with real suffering, with real something. And so, I said, I said, Absolutely not, I'm not. I didn't continue to work on that.

But that helped me to think about what I was doing in the novel more clearly. I realized that I couldn't, and I didn't want to, report on the immediate present at all in the novel. And the way that I ended up threading the story of migration in the novel is, of course, through radio, through the kids reenacting in the backseat, but also through a third person narrator that tells the story of seven kids riding atop the train, migrating across national boundaries. You never know exactly where they are and if it is at all, North America, Central America, or where, it's a narrative composed from bits and pieces of other narratives in literary history that have dealt with journeying, immigration, descending into an underworld of sorts.

I guess one thing I should say in this respect as well as that, that with that narrative, I wanted to somehow intersect the very American genre, par excellence of the road trip novel, with a story of journeying that perhaps is more common to Latin America, which has to do with journeying as a form of journeying downward, spiraling into deeper level of consciousness or spiraling into some kind of underworld, right. I'm thinking here primarily of Juan Rulfo and his masterpiece, *Pedro Páramo*, but not only.

And so I wanted the typical American road trip to be intersected by this Latin American form, to put it in very blunt and simplistic terms, therefore creating a kind of wider hemispheric narrative, thinking about us, us as a region, the U.S., Mexico, Central America, as a corridor of migration that has been for so many years and will continue to be. So yeah, that narrative is composed of bits and pieces of journeys, of literary journeys. I'm going to get a tiny bit nerdy, but very, very, very - it'll be fast. [Audience laughs].

So, for example, like the narrative of journey, by far in the Western tradition, Homer's *Odyssey*, Book 11, is Odysseus (or Ulysses) descending to the Hades, to the underworld, to talk to his ancestors, to figure out what the fuck - sorry - what the hell he is going to do with his life now that he's in the middle of this trip. And he talks to his elders.

And that same book, Book 11, was translated, not from Greek, but from Latin, by Ezra Pound, into a very particular meter called Anglo-Saxon accentual verse, which makes English sound like German somehow. And I was working with that, translating that back into Spanish, phrases,

lines of poems such as, "Swartest night stretched over wretched men there," back into Spanish, back into English, figuring out cadence and rhythm and composing in this way - this narrative thread that carries the novel, and that carries an immigration narrative, that puts immigration where I think it should be, which is in the epics of humanity, the great epics of our existence, right, people who migrate, people who, who move and reinvent their lives, people who have the courage to begin again, and who found something, who found a new community within another.

And somehow, I think that literature can do that, right, literature, fiction, has the power, of course, to re-signify, to rename, to put story in the wider arc of history and remind us of our shared humanity. It has a power, as Ruth was saying - quoting - to give us some clarity and hindsight, and to remind us that the only thing we have between us are the stories that we tell each other. Right? The love that we give each other? Yes, of course, but the only thing we pass down are those little knowledges, ways of telling the world, ways of experiencing them, ways of experiencing the world, ways of articulating a narrative about ourselves and others. So that is what that novel is about, a novel about naming and renaming. So I'm going to close with this passage that has a lot to do with naming and renaming.

"Unhappiness grows slowly. It lingers inside you, silently, surreptitiously. You nourish it, feeding it scraps of yourself every day - it is the dog kept locked away in the back patio that will bite your hand off if you let it. Unhappiness takes time, but eventually it takes over completely. And then happiness - that word - arrives only sometimes, and always like a sudden change of weather. It found us on our tenth day into the trip.

I had called a number of motels in Graceland. None picked up, except one. An old lady answered the phone, her voice like a distant fire crackling its way into my ear.

'Elvis Presley Boulevard at your service.'

I wondered if I was misunderstanding her when she said, 'Yes, ma'am. Plenty of room here and a new guitar pool.' But we find exactly that. The motel all to ourselves. A motel with a swimming pool in the shape of an electric guitar. A motel in which, instead of a bedside Bible, there's an Elvis Presley songbook. [Audience laughs]. A motel with Elvis Presley everywhere, from the hand towels in the rooms to the salt and pepper shakers in the breakfast area.

The boy and his father stayed behind in the parking lot, rearranging the daily puzzle of our luggage, and the girl and I run up to the room to pee. We climb stairs, walk past eerie Elvis wax statues, hundreds of pictures and cartoons, an Elvis pinata, an old Elvis jukebox, small statuettes, yellowing t-shirts with the King's face nailed to the walls. By the time we make it to our room, we've understood - the girl in her own terms - that we're in some sort of temple or mausoleum, she's understood that this man is or was something important. She looks up at a photograph of a 30-something-year-old Elvis Presley hanging on the wall between the two double beds in our new room and asks, 'Is that Jesus fucking Christ, mama?' [Audience laughs].

'No, it's Elvis.'

'Mama, could you leave Papa and marry Elvis, if you wanted?'

I try not to laugh, but I do. I say I'll consider it. But then I tell her, 'I would, except he's dead, my love.'

'This poor young man is dead?'

'He is.'

'Like Johnny Cash is dead?' 'That's right.' 'Like Janis Joplin is dead?' 'Yeah, that's right.'

When the boy and my husband walk in with bags and suitcases, we all change into our swimsuits and run down to the guitar pool. We forget the towels, and the sunscreen - but then again, we're the type of family that has never taken a picnic blanket to a picnic, or beach chairs to a beach.

The girl, so cautious and philosophical in all her daily activities, becomes a wild beast in the water. She's possessed, delirious. Beats on her own head and stomach like one of those post-hippie drummers who's been on LSD for too many decades. Her laughter thunders in her open mouth, all milk teeth and perfect pink gums. She jumps into the pool, wriggles her way to freedom from our nervous clutches. Discovers, underwater, that she does not know how to surface. So, we fish her out and hold her tight and say:

'Don't do that again. Be careful. You don't know how to swim yet.' We don't know how to embrace her boundless enthusiasm, or her volcanic bursts of vitality. It's hard for the rest of us, I think, to keep up with the dashing, reckless train of her happiness. Hard, for me at least, to let her be when I keep on feeling that I have to save her from the world. I'm constantly imagining that she'll fall, or get burned, or be run over, or that she will drown right now in this guitar-shaped swimming pool in Memphis, Tennessee, her face and my mind all blue and swollen. A friend of mine calls this "the rescue distance," the constant equation operating in a parent's mind, where time and distance are factored in to calculate whether it would be possible to save a child from danger.

But at some point, like flipping a switch, we all stopped calculating grim catastrophes and just let go. We tacitly agreed to follow her, instead of expecting her to stay back with us, in our safe incapacity for life. We howl, we undulate, we plunge and resurface to float on our backs, looking up at the cloudless sky. We open our eyes wide inside the burning chlorine-water, we emulate shitty fountain-statues, spouting water from our mouths. I teach them a choreography for "All Shook Up" that I vaguely remember being taught by a childhood friend, a lot of shoulder shaking and some hip back-and-forth in the "ughs" of the song. And then, when the spell of the

girl has cast on us finally evaporates, we all sit by the edge of the pool, dangling our legs in the water catching our breath.

Later that night, lying in the dark of our motel bedroom, my husband tells the two children and Apache story, about how Apaches learned their war names. We listened to him, silent. His voice rises and whirls around the room, carried across the thick hot air that the ceiling fan stirs – its cheap veneer blades squeaking a bit. We lie face up, trying to catch a breeze. Except the girl. She lies on her tummy and sucks her thumb, her suck-rhythm in syncopation with the cyclical rattle of paddles bobbling in the ceiling fan. The boy waits for his father to finish the story, and then says:

'If she were an Apache, her war name would be Loud Thumb.'

'Me?' the girl asks, unplugging her thumb from her mouth and raising her head in the dark, not convinced, but always proud to be talked about.

'Yeah, Loud Thumb or Suck Thumb.'

'No, no, my war name would be Grace Land Memphis Tennessee or Guitar Swimming Pool. Either/or.'

'Those are Apache names right, Pa?' The boy asks.

'No, they're not,' my husband confirms. 'Guitar Swimming Pool is not an Apache name.'

'Well, then, I want to be Grace Land Memphis,' she says.

'It's Graceland, comma, Memphis, you moron,' the boy informs her from the heights of his now 10-year-old superiority.

'Fine, then. So, I'll be Memphis. Just Memphis.'

She says this with the authoritative assurance of bureaucrats closing their plastic windows, taking no more requests, no more complaints, and then plugs her thumb right back into her mouth. We know this side of her: when she's made up her stubborn little mind, there is no way to convince her otherwise, so we defer, respect her resolve, and say no more.

'What about you?' I ask the boy.

'Me?'

'He would be Swift Feather,' his father immediately suggests.

'Yeah, that's right. Swift Feather. And Ma? Who's she?' he asks.

My husband takes his time to think about it, and finally says:

'She would be Lucky Arrow.'

I like the name, and I smile in acknowledgement, or in gratitude. I smile at him for the first time in days, maybe weeks. But he can't see me smile because the room is dark, and his eyes are probably closed anyway. Then I ask him:

'And you? What would your war name be?'

The girl chimes in without taking her thumb out of her mouth, lisping, thething, and fumbling her words:

'Pa, he's the Elvis. Or the Jesus fucking Christ. Either/or.'

My husband and I laugh and the boy reprimands her:

'You're gonna go to hell, if you keep saying that.' He probably chastises her more because of our praising laughter than because of the content of her statement. She certainly does not know why she should be censored. Then, taking her thumb out of her mouth she asks,

'Who's your favorite Apache, Pa? Geronimo?'

'No, my favorite is Chief Cochise.'

'Then you get to be Papa Cochise,' she says, like she's handing him a gift.

'Papa Cochise,' my husband whispers back. And slowly, softly we fall asleep, embracing these new names, the ceiling fan slicing the thick air in the room, thinning it. I fall asleep at the same time as the three of them, maybe for the first time in years. And as I do, I cling to these four certainties. Swift Feather, Papa Cochise, Lucky Arrow, Memphis." Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Rebecca Hoogs, Host

We'll be back in a moment, but first—in her talk, Valeria Luiselli says that immigration narratives and stories of “people who migrate, move,” and have the courage “to reinvent their lives,” should be “in the epics of humanity, the great epics of our existence.” If that resonates with you, we think you'll love SAL's upcoming talk with novelist, essayist, and poet Luis Alberto Urrea, the author of 17 works including, most recently, *The House of Broken Angels*. This book

which centers on the De La Cruzes, a family on the Mexican-American border, as they celebrate two beloved relatives during a raucous and moving weekend. Urrea will present at Seattle Arts & Lectures on Wednesday, May 20. Tickets are available now at lectures.org. Just for *SAL/on air* listeners, we have a special promo that will get you 30% off tickets: just enter the code URREA30 at checkout. Now, here's more from Valeria Luiselli and Q&A moderator Florangela Davila.

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Florangela Davila

I feel a little mean breaking that spell, that she just cast on all of us. I was an immigration reporter about 12 years ago, and I remember feeling like I couldn't have a decent conversation with anybody, that there were so few of us, even going to conferences. Immigration reporters were so small, nobody seemed interested. The power of the book that you've written, the power there, is that it feels so timely. I kept thinking over and over of all the people who I knew could connect to the book, because of the story. So, we heard Ruth and you echoing how it reminds us of our humanity. But, my first question is: Does literature have a role to play in not just reminding us of our responsibility but in the responsibility that we need to take.

Valeria Luiselli

It's a good question. I think that - I mean, literature is so vast, and there's so many different vehicles within literature, so many different ways of thinking about the art of writing, and it's kind of clear to me, in my own practice - and I wouldn't want to be prescriptive about others and how they envisage their own practice - that when I write fiction, I can't think of it in terms of a call to action. I can't think of it as, as a way to, to educate politically or to even report on the world.

Like, I think that I started sensing in me a kind of, like, a kind of arrogance, in trying to do something like that right, and in trying to use fiction as a way to convince I got very annoyed with myself and disappointed, and then when I wrote *Tell Me How It Ends*, I think I was able to think of it as an instrument, and especially as an instrument, as an object, that was going to circulate in the world, in the small world at the end, in which readers of books exist. So, it could be - it was probably going to be talked about, I thought, in radio and in some newspaper columns and some articles - [it is] enough, I thought, to bring this conversation into spaces that usually ignore the discussion, the larger discussion on immigration.

I must remind you, I was writing this in 2015, where immigration and this particular exodus had disappeared from the headlines. It was treated like headline material for a while, and then disappeared, completely, although [the] crisis is still there. And so, I wanted to make an intervention in the dialogue, and I did think of this book, as a book that was a reminder and maybe a mirror with which to look at ourselves more critically in the way that we think about, talk about, write about and ultimately envision immigration.

Florangela Davila

I read that you did your undergraduate dissertation on immigration.

Valeria Luiselli

It's really embarrassing. But yeah, I mean, it's a really bad dissertation.

Florangela Davila

I mean, you've been thinking about these issues for a long time. And we could even start there - or we could just start with the notion of, the fact that you moved around so much in your childhood, and I'm curious about how that influenced your sense of otherness and foreignness and boundaries and connectedness? Can you tell us a little bit about all the different places you've lived? And were there moments that really were turning points that you can sort of pinpoint to what you're exploring now in this novel?

Valeria Luiselli

Yeah, sure. I mean, I lived, indeed, in many different places from South Africa to Korea to India - and, in many of those places, being Mexican was not easy. I mean, definitely way easier than being Mexican here or being Mexican in a certain context here in the U.S., but Mexico is, as many other nationalities, but it's seen in these, like, layers of clichés and identity burdens that are difficult to deal with, right? There's all these things attached to Mexicanity, like sort of the lazy Mexican, the lying Mexican, the always-late Mexican - I am often late, but [audience laughs] - but I'm always trying not to be - and all these sort of negative clichés around Mexicanity that, even as a child, I felt that I had to, in a kind of Quixotesque way, fight against and show that it wasn't that way and prove that those stereotypes were just stereotypes.

I think many, many people, many children, many adults, experience that frustration of belonging to a nationality that is misunderstood and seen through a lot of layers of voluntary ignorance, I guess that's what it is. So, I was not only always foreign, but always felt a kind of tension with my nationality, or between my nationality and the world around me, and I think that when I came to the U.S. for the first time, before I came to live here, I wanted to be a dancer.

I was not a great dancer, but I wanted to study contemporary ballet. So, I came here for a summer, and the negotiation was I'll do an internship in the U.N. with my family, but please pay for my dance classes. And they said fine, okay, yes. And I came to the U.S. to try out, to try to get into a company (that I didn't get into), the Limon Company, and work in the UNDP, the United Nations Development Program, and I started writing my undergrad dissertation then. And it was then that I observed sort of the, the very liminal existence that my linguistic and cultural community in the U.S. occupied or lived in, right? In New York, in particular, the many Mexican men who drive or who ride their bicycles, invisible to the rest, always carrying their chains or bicycle chains kind of crosswise on their chests, vaguely resembling Emiliano Zapata with his crosswise belt, right, these guys and their bicycles, who just speed through the city, carrying so many things and are never kind of recognized or seen by others. And then they descend into the kind of underworlds - the basements of delis and restaurants where no one sees them either.

And we're, and I - I spoke to a lot of people in that summer, connected to a lot of Mexican people living here. I had never really spent that much time in the U.S. And I started thinking of my dissertation, my thesis, and it was a very well-intentioned and poorly written critique of John Rawls's 'Theory of Justice' - has anyone - does anyone read John Rawls still? - that attempted to argue that the theory of justice did not contemplate undocumented people as part of the social contract, and was therefore philosophically not sound. But I was very into analytic philosophies. It was all about proving and axioms and whatever. So, that was my first engagement, my first, I guess, serious engagement, but living here now in 10 years, I became involved with immigration in many different ways, and not just immigration, I became involved with, with my community and communities in many different ways.

Florangela Davila

Do you think that notion of kind of being dismissed, being marginalized, not being in the mainstream that started from when you lived in different countries, do you think that fuels your power of observation? Nobody's paying attention to you, so then you have power in noticing everything else?

Valeria Luiselli

I mean, I definitely think that when one is always a foreigner, you're kind of ghostly, right, you're always kind of a newcomer, or about to leave, so you inhabit a kind of ghostly existence, which then, if you can appropriate that and make it yours, it is a way of always sitting in a space of observation, right, always observing others. And I think that yes, I mean that - one of the reasons that I write is that foreignness put me in a space of constant observation, you have to also survive - like, as a kid, especially, to survive in the very complicated ecology of school, you have to observe and understand the codes and then somehow embody them so that you can navigate that, right. So, I definitely ascribe my being a writer to that, and also to the fact that my two sisters are super loud [audience laughs] and super bossy and are very good at telling stories, so I never got a chance at the table.

Florangela Davila

They got all the attention.

Valeria Luiselli

They were super loud and they tell the stories, and - and it was like that - and then - nothing. So, I guess that writing is my, like, my revenge. [laughs]

Florangela Davila

Why - I'm curious about some of the narrative devices that you use in the novels - there's this assumption, I think for people who are familiar with your previous book, the work of nonfiction, the essays, that the couple are Mexican, that it's you, perhaps, and we don't - you don't really tell us much about who they are, even their race or ethnicity, and there might be a hint here and there - the notion of having a blended family, so there's two kids, but each kid comes from the parent but then - from other, you know, what I mean - the siblings, the step siblings - and

also using the construct of a marriage that is about to dissolve, setting all those things, those elements, I was curious about why you chose to put those in the novel.

Valeria Luiselli

Yeah, I think I mean, well, first of all, in terms of identity and identity politics, and I am very uncomfortable with the way that one arrives in the U.S. and is handed, like, an identity welcome package. And that's it. That's what you got, right? You get what you get and you don't get upset. And it's very - it constrains, it constrains deeply - and constrains in terms of the expectations that others have of what you are supposed to write about, what you are like - when you are heard and when you're not. So, if you're a woman of color, you can really only write about and from there, and are expected to remain there. And why not, like, I don't know write, sci fi? I mean, of course, many writers do it - they just don't give a damn, as they should not give a damn and do whatever they want to do - but identity, especially the politics around minority culture in the U.S., is very suffocating, right?

So, I was very - it was very clear to me that I wanted to write a novel in which the identities of the family weren't so clear. So, there are no proper names, right? If you call someone Maria or Julia, then immediately there's like, of course, an input from the readers' points of view, an assumption of identities. There's never a physical description of like, hair color or skin color, very, there are descriptions about what happens to the eyes of the girl when she's about to cry, how they swell up and get kind of red around the edges, and the way she sucks her thumb, but I was very, very, very consciously, not painting an immovable portrait of an identity that attaches so many assumptions to it.

Florangela Davila

But they call - what I was curious about is how they call their parents, or the boy does, Ma and Pa. Which I was, you know, that is not a common way - I think I sort of did a quick survey in the newsroom, you know - not mom, not mother, not mommy, but ma, which to me reminded me very much of Little House on the Prairie or The Waltons, there was something very Americana in that term and your decision. Why did you choose that?

Valeria Luiselli

Well, it could also mean - you could elongate the vowel and say "Maaaaw," or you could think of it as a short vowel and say, "Mah." And then it's another, right, like it's still - it's not an empty signifier, "mah," but it's ample enough that a lot can be assumed into it, or read into it, right? And I think many readers might come to the novel with the assumption that it's a Mexican family, but indeed, there are several markers that contradict the idea that it's an entirely Mexican family. Right? So, the husband is - really, he doesn't speak Spanish, for instance. So yeah, I mean, I don't know - I think that the literature should be a place in which we can move more freely, and, like, free from the bounds of all the identity assumptions that usually, I think, that sometimes cloud, sometimes frame, and maybe over-frame, our understanding of reality.

Florangela Davila

I'm grateful that you brought up the part about being a dancer or studying dance because I was really taken by the sound that both of the characters, the two adult characters, are documentarians. It starts with this notion of the father, the husband, has a boom mic, so there's this notion of space and distance. I think the wife has the handheld recorder. There's so many references, I kept thinking that every radio reporter, or anybody who loves radio, but especially radio reporters, anybody who collects sound, will love this book because it talks about process and just the power of observation. So, I'm curious if you thought - and certainly at the climax of the book, which I will not give away, there is a - such a moving element of rhythm and pace. So, I'm curious if dance informs your writing because you are so connected to documenting in that way, and using that in your in this book?

Valeria Luiselli

Well, it definitely does, at least in terms of compensation. I was a dancer with a bad sense of rhythm, which really, really, is like a bad combination for someone to be a professional. I was really good at, like, understanding it rationally, but then there was something not natural about my relationship to 1234-1234-1234, like I had to say to myself somehow, and I think that maybe in compensation, I write with my ears completely. For me, it's all about rhythm and meter and rhythmic cadence and about finding, like, a foreignization to cadence as well, right? So some of the best passages of the novel, in my perspective, are ones that I wrote simultaneously in English and Spanish, so going back and forth, like one line in one language and then the other in another, and finding, like, the different rhythms and how they might be translated into one language and the other.

And I thought at some point very naively, that I could write the entire novel like this. Also, because I was getting consistently bullied by my editors in Mexico, because they knew that I was writing in English, and they said, "How dare you write in the language of the Empire? Like, what are you doing?" And it happened with *Tell Me How It Ends* before. I had written it in English, and then I wanted someone to translate it into Spanish and publish it in Mexico that way. And so, we had a meeting, and our meeting - my editors are my age, and we kind of began publishing together, so we function more like a soccer team than anything else. And so, they took me into a cantina, a bar, and at the fifth tequila, they forced me to sign this serviette, in which I said, 'Every time that I write anything in the language of the Empire, I will self-translate it' as a kind of penitence.

And so I did stick to my - I kept my word with *Tell Me How It Ends*, and I was kind of glad that I did because it became a much more complex book when I had to rewrite in Spanish and think and have like a mental fight, not only with the U.S. and the U.S. government, but now with the Mexican government - equally fucked up, both of them [audience laughs] - so I thought that the novel, the book, just like doubled at least in size, the essay and the original essay in English doubled in size because now I was fighting against two governments, thinking and having a dialogue with my two linguistic communities, the one in the U.S. and the one in Mexico, right, but two places where I belong, in different ways and different modes, but where I belong.

Anyway, it worked, but with a novel it didn't work, or at least I tried some passages like that, and they are lovely, but a novel is about rhythm. It's about rhythm, the way that like swimming is about rhythm, or walking, or running, that you have to find a kind of respiration that takes you all the way. Especially with, not with poetry as - I mean poetry in a different way - but a novel needs this kind of sustained respiration and working the way I was working, it could have been a great series of poems, but that's not what I was doing, so I gave up on that idea and just wrote it in English and also did not keep my word and someone else is translating it into Spanish. [Audience laughs]

Florangela Davila

The beauty of having the physical book are the Polaroids that are included in the book, that reference -can you talk a little bit about the photos, how they're referenced in the book, who took the photos, and -my husband is reading the book as an audio book, and I think it's your voice at the beginning. I'm curious about your notion of how this book should be consumed. If you're doing the audio book, you don't get the joy of seeing the list of all the elements that are in the archivable boxes, and then you miss out as well, in terms of the photograph.

Valeria Luiselli

I think you can download a PDF with the pictures, but I may be wrong. Yes, I read my own audiobook and it's something that I'll never do again. It's a hardest thing that I've ever done. I got bronchitis afterwards. It's also very frustrating because the book is already out and then you realize like, why the hell did I use the word assert? Or, like, usufruct? Or - like, what? Like what? And you can't do anything about it, it's too late. But it's a good learning experience as well, like, just in terms of getting to know your book as a thing in the world and no longer something that you're in the process of making, and a space in which you're living because you're living with a book when you're writing it, right.

My daughter used to make fun of me. I would put her to bed at night, and then go up to my studio to work, and so she would say, oh, you're going with your imaginary friends now right, mama? And yeah, it is that, right?

And then you asked about the photographs? So the photographs were just a way - so I, in many other - not many - in some other projects that I've undertaken, books that I've begun, I document through different means, not only writing, but through sound recording or photographing, because I find that doing so allows me to hear or see, in a much more attentive way, just - not a telephone because a telephone is a completely different animal and this is not a fetish or romanticism about older cameras - but really like, if you have a camera in your hand, you're already seeing differently, you're already photographing before you photograph, right? So, it's a way of observing. Just as when you have a recorder and you're trying to sample sound, you're listening differently, or when you have a notebook too, I guess, and are recording or documenting, you're already writing, right. So, I often use other methods of documenting, because I'm also interested in the relationship between the process of composing a novel or a work, in general, and the final result of that, and how those two things relate to each other. Or to say it in different words, I'm interested in the question of how to shorten the distance

between process and final result in such a way that the process reflects in the final result, in such a way that the process leaves fingerprints on the final result, right.

So that if I documented through pictures and sound recording, there's some kind of debris or remainder of that in the final result. But anyway, so I took pictures of the beginning, before I knew I was writing a novel, and a year later, after taking notes for a year and thinking, am I going to write this in English, write this in Spanish, is this going to be an essay? All the procrastinating kind of questions that I asked myself for a year or so before I actually write. I was - I had to go to Berlin and show some of my work, my work in progress, and I ended up showing the photographs, because it was in a gallery space. I had to sit with the photographs, with a, with them for about a week, and I sort of arranged them into sentences and rearranged them and found a narrative, or this or that, and it was thanks to the photographs that I was, I was able to find the beginning of something, like I sat - it was thanks to arranging and rearranging that archive, but I sat down one night finally, at the computer, and just started. And later, for a long time, I wondered if they were just a catalyst for me, or if they were going to be embedded in the novel and how they would be, would they be kind of an illustration of what was said? No, that seemed really boring. Would they be in a kind of tension with what was being said? Maybe, but how? Anyway, so it was a long process of deciding what kind of relationship that would be, between text and image, and at the end, they are where they are. You'll see when you read the book.

Florangela Davila

I just love the fact that you're talking about storytelling and documenting the undocumented. And you have all these different ways of acknowledging the power of sound, the power of photography, the power of words, and then ultimately, the voices and who needs to be telling these people's stories - the notion of echoes, even when you're - during the road trip. This is a question from the audience. I'm specifically curious about your depiction of the Apache as a disappeared and forgotten tribe of the past that a lead character is obsessed with tracking (the husband), but who seems to have no awareness of Apache people still living in the southwest today.

Valeria Luiselli

Yeah, totally. I agree. I mean, this is something real right? And I think that it is, it happens often in narratives around Native American nations, that they're talked about as if they don't exist anymore, right? It's a conversation I've had with many friends who are Native American and the way that the myth reproduces the violence, right, or the storytelling reproduces the violence. Yes, indeed, I mean, what can I say except, yes, I agree. One of the characters in the story who talks about the Chiricahua Apaches, talks about the Apaches as if they no longer existed, and the children kind of - in the backseat, absorb that story, but link it then to the removal, so - they link the story of removal of Native Americans to the story of removals of meaning deportations, right. So, I mean, it's, again, sort of the way that knowledge is passed down, but then repassed back to it, to the adult world, and combined and confused. But, I just wherever you are, yes, I agree. The husband definitely doesn't know what he's talking about. [Audience laughs]

I'm not gonna say it often happens, because there's probably a lot of husbands here. But yeah, that one doesn't.

Florangela Davila

Another question from the audience: literature and other forms of art helps us shed light on important stories. But how do we write, paint, etc., other people's stories in an ethical way, without appropriating or gaining fame at the expense of others suffering?

Valeria Luiselli

Yeah, that's another question that is something that I constantly grapple with, especially when you're writing fiction, right? It's precisely because I think fiction is not a tool, a political tool, the way that a piece of nonfiction can be - then what is it going to be? I mean, I don't think that - I think that one doesn't write from those categories, like fame, and that one writes grappling with sentence structure, and meaning, and what you're doing, and where you're going to arrive that day, and then later, there's a reckoning and a revision of what you've said, how you've said it, what you want to do with what you're fabricating, right? And I think one of the questions that, for me, was a constant one was, how do I write about this particular exodus without simply using the stories that I've heard in court, the kids that I work with, the kids that I teach in the detention center, and sort of just reproducing? And I mean, it was something that I grappled with years ago, in Mexico, when the drug wars started. A lot of people, a lot of writers in my generation and others, started writing about the drug wars, very much without a filter, just really sort of directly reproducing the violence that we were all seeing on the news, or in reality, and I had a very - I was younger, so I was a little bit more, I don't know, not as flexible in my thinking, as maybe I am now, but I found it terrible - I dismissed the sole idea of even writing about the drug wars. I thought that's simply not ethical, right?

Of course, I was wrong in many ways, because there are many writers that did something very interesting and very powerful and meaningful with the way that we felt Mexico was falling apart in those years. And I feel similarly with writing about this immigration crisis, although I think that the story won't end. The circle won't close until the generation of kids arriving here is old enough to tell their own story. And they will, and I mean, part of the work that I am engaged in now is in teaching creative writing in detention spaces - to who knows how many kids there and I say kids, but they're really teenagers - who will maybe one day, tap back into something that maybe they discovered in writing, and will take it elsewhere, right? That's kind of how it is. The people that touch us somehow give us something when we're that age, or when we're given something like the capacity to write our story, or to find in writing some kind of meaning and something else, then sometimes we're able to take it further when we're older. And that's how I think about that story now, or my role in that in doing that.

Florangela Davila

The spark. My final question is a personal one about status. Your previous book talked about applying for a green card. And I'm wondering, I'm the child of immigrants, and I watched my mother make the decision of applying to be a U.S. citizen, and I remember the pause and that decision of pledging allegiance to one country meant saying no to the other country, and

patriotism. And it's a challenging decision, and I'm wondering, given where we are now, given everything that you've learned, have you thought about - have you applied for citizenship? Are you choosing not to? And if you're able to take that step, the privilege that you are able to do so, given that sense that so many people want that and are unable to.

Valeria Luiselli

Yeah, I do. I mean, I do think about that. And I do want to - I will apply for citizenship when time comes. I might wait until this administration is gone. [Audience applause]. But then not too much, because I do want to vote next round, and I think I might be able to. [Applause].

And, yeah, so I am a romantic in many ways, but I'm also pragmatic, and I am also 35 and I have never voted, which sucks. Because I'm either not in Mexico or didn't do the thing on time at the consulate to be able to vote from abroad, and I also inherited an Italian nationality from my grandfather. But the Italian government sends you the ballots one month after the elections, [audience laughs] so I've never voted in Italy either. So, I've never voted, and I'm really looking forward to, so yes, I will become a citizen.

Florangela Davila

I wanted to thank the audience for coming out tonight for a Seattle Arts & Lectures event, which always reminds us of how great it is to live in this city, for a moment like this, and to please give a round of applause to Valeria Luiselli.

[APPLAUSE]

[PODCAST THEME PLAYS]

Rebecca Hoogs, Host

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