

Leslie Lehr and Lisa Braxton WFWA Recording

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SPEAKERS

Maggie Lynch, Leslie Lehr, Lisa Braxton

Maggie Lynch 00:05

Hello, and welcome to Dust Jackets: Conversations with Authors. Today is a second double author show focusing on the diversity of stories that make up women's fiction. A reminder to you that women's fiction day is June 8, and the Women's Fiction Writers Association is planning an entire day of events: getting to know authors, some great deals on books, and some nice giveaway prizes. So be sure to check the show notes to learn all about this and how to participate. Let me introduce you to the two women we're talking with today. Lisa Braxton is an essayist, short story writer and novelist. Her debut novel *The Talking Drum* was released in May 2020. Barely out a year, it has been racking up awards. In 2020, she won the Shelf Unbound Best Indie Book Award and the National Association of Black journalists Outstanding Literary Award. Already in 2021, she's been awarded the Independent Publishers Gold Medal for Urban Fiction. Our other guest is Leslie Lehr. She is a seasoned writer and essayist. Her women's fiction includes both fiction and nonfiction. Her critically acclaimed nonfiction book, *A Boob's Life*, is currently being developed for a comedy series on HBO. Her novels include: *What A Mother Knows*; *Wife Goes On*; and *66 Laps*. Leslie has also worked in film production and has taught for 10 years for the Writers Program at UCLA. As you can see, once again, we have two powerhouse women with us. I haven't had the chance to read any of these books. So I'm flying a little blind based on blurbs and reviews and things that I've researched. So please, both Leslie and Lisa, feel free to correct me if I ask a silly question. Or I say something wrong. So my first question for each of you is: When you started writing, did you know you wanted to write women's fiction? Or did you write and then realize it was women's fiction? Why don't we start with you, Leslie?

Leslie Lehr 02:13

I still am not sure about the label of women's fiction. I feel like when I started writing, I wrote things for me that interested me. And that was about contemporary women. And I do remember a guy saying, when am I going to pick a major? Because he was writing thrillers, you know, and my first novel was a drama. My second one was more of a comedy, you know about and for women. And my third one is a thriller. And I thought, but my major is women. That is my genre, I write about women. But I kind of feel like women's fiction is a new title. That was a more mature outgrowth of the old name of Chick-Lit, which was really condescending. And yet when men write about women, it's just fiction, you know. And to have women's fiction on the shelf... It doesn't make me happy. And yet, to be in this organization of

women who are writing for each other and really understand the quality of literature, and the quality of stories that come out, makes me very proud to be a writer of women's fiction. So I feel like I'm naturally a writer of women's fiction because I am a woman, and I write about women. So that for me is how that works. That makes total sense. Evidently, the women's fiction writers Association really defines it as the emotional journey. It doesn't even necessarily have to be a woman. It can be a man. But I hear you on the, you know, the distinction between fiction for men who write about women and calling it women's fiction when a woman writes it. That certainly is a vestige of second class citizenship. So Lisa, how about you?

Lisa Braxton 03:57

Well, my background is journalism. And so I when I was decided to go ahead and finally begin writing that novel that I've been wanting to write since childhood, I felt I needed to go back to grad school and learn the nuts and bolts of writing a novel. So while I was at Southern New Hampshire University, in their low residency program, my mentor professors mentioned how women are the biggest readers in the country. They read much more than men do. And if you're going to write fiction, keep that in mind as you're writing your story. So I did a little bit of research. There was an Associated Press study that says that typically women read nine books a year, whereas men read about five books a year. And women in all categories, except for history and biography, are the biggest readers. Men only read 20% of fiction. And that goes for us, the UK, and Canada. And so it would make sense, from a marketing standpoint, to target women in my writing. Thinking back, when I was a child reading my novels, I felt that the authors were writing to me. They're writing to me, from a girl's point of view, from a woman's point of view. And as I was began to write *The Talking Drum*, in the back of my mind, I would see women in the audience, as I'm writing this story. So I felt that I was writing to women. So I knew before I started the first page that I was writing to women readers.

Maggie Lynch 05:28

Very good. I'm so glad to hear those two different approaches, because I think it really is representative of the way that novelists approach that. You know, some people just dive in and they start writing what they want. And then they figure out later, you know, what category does this fit into. And other people, like you, take a very studied approach, which is one that usually works very well for people. That means you're a business woman and you're aware of the market. So that's, that's a really great approach. So you both write from really different experiences. And so I'd like to start with you, Lisa. From what I've read about your story, *The Talking Drum*, it's set against the backdrop of an urban development project and all the politics and realities of how that is undertaken. Usually, in my opinion, not helpful things. But beneath it all, what you really explain is the theme of what it means to be community. Can you talk a bit about that? The politics and realities of Urban Development and Community and how you explore that in your book?

Lisa Braxton 06:39

Yes, I get a lot of inspiration from my parents, actually. They opened up a clothing store in an urban area of Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1969. And, as a child watching them alter clothes and size people, and wait on customers, I saw where there was more than just a sales transaction there. There was their relationships forming. In fact, my parents became friends with some of their customers. They became, you know, social friends. And some would come into the store, and it wasn't just to buy something, it

was to really talk about the issues of the day, like what's going on at City Hall,. They're tearing down this building, or, you know, how do I get my my son into college, and those kinds of things. So I saw that community building right before my eyes as a child. And, as time went on, the factories in Bridgeport began to move away, shut down. And a lot of the, the workers didn't have any place to work anymore. And there was a lot of increase in crime, and also drug problems. And people either moved away or they got sucked into drugs. I saw where the fabric of the community was beginning to fray. Partially also, because of urban redevelopment. The city leaders decided that the waterfront area was to be developed, where there used to be two and three family houses. The working class people who lived there who can work in the factories. They took those homes by eminent domain, to use the waterfront to attract the people outside of Bridgeport and Fairfield County and Westchester, New York. Those areas that had money to come to the oyster bar, or put your their boat there at the Marina, or come up to some of the sports games and spend ytheir money. So it's becoming upscale in that way. And it was very hard to see that happen and see how the Bridgeport my parents came to, as African Americans from the south during segregation to the promised land, to see how the promised land was becoming frayed. And then I also felt that, in my 40s, when I was finally writing this novel, I didn't want to just write something that was entertaining to people. I want to write something that would make people think. So people who have experienced urban redevelopment, who've lost their neighborhoods, for them to think about these things and talk about these things. And for people to just not walk away from the book and say: Well, that was an interesting read, but to actually think about and talk about the issues that we're facing all over the country these days.

Maggie Lynch 09:06

Yes. And how does does that kind of formation of community play--again because I haven't been able to read your book--in terms of how people deal with this situation?

Lisa Braxton 09:20

Well, in my novel, *The Talking Drum*, Omar is an African drummer. He's come to the US on a Rotary scholarship, and he lives in petite Africa. It's a fictional neighborhood, in the fictional city in my in my book. At the time, there's a threat of some of the properties being taken by eminent domain in an immigrant neighborhood, with people from different parts of West Africa, as well as the Caribbean, and some LatinX individuals as well. And he is married to an African American woman, he's from Senegal, and she says: Well, we need to move because they're going to take our building. We're renting this apartment. A he was like: No, the US has been very good to me. I came here on a scholarship. And I know that Uncle Sam will not do us wrong. So they're having these marital problems largely caused by the power structure. And then his uncle, Uncle Mustafa, is like the the mayor of petite Africa. He's the person who's championing the cause of let's all go down to City Hall and protest, and storm these meetings, and get these people to understand that we need to save our neighborhood. So that's how it plays out. And as the story goes on, you see where there are people in petite Africa who ended up really suffering because of the eminent domain. And I did a lot of research. I read a lot of books about what happened during the 70s iand the 80s, with eminent domain. There were people who didn't survive that, who actually passed away because they were uprooted, pulled out of their neighborhood. They lost their friendships, their family, all those; and so they just couldn't go on. And those are the things within the fabric of the neighborhood and community that I want to express, that I did express in my book.

Maggie Lynch 11:05

Wonderful. Thank you so much. Leslie, I'd like to switch to you. At least two of your novels appear to have more of a suburban environment that your characters are in. Correct me if I'm wrong. Again, I haven't been able to read any of these books. But still, friendships and and community play a big role. Can you just kind of tell me a little bit about those? I'm particularly thinking of the descriptions for 66 laps. And I've already forgotten the name of the other one,

Leslie Lehr 11:40

Wife Goes On. And then my most recent one was What A Mother Knows.

Maggie Lynch 11:46

The one, What A Mother Knows seems to be more of a thriller or suspense. But if you can just kind of, you know, talk about it, if that's, urban or suburban and about community.

Leslie Lehr 11:56

They're definitely more suburban, because that's where I'm from. And for me, writing was not, I mean I always wrote, but I never really intended to be a writer until motherhood made it very difficult to do my chosen profession, which was filmmaking. And so I was always writing on the side and home with my first child. And so the things that really made me struggle, the identity issues as a woman in America and clearly an entitled middle class white woman. I was still struggling with basic identity issues of Who am I? Where do I fit in the community? How do I fit in? Where's the power, not with the mother? And so my questions of, you know, all these things really would drive me to write essays. So I would like kind of rant through my first couple books, which were like parenting books. My first book was called Welcome to Club Mom, the end of life as you know it. My editor changed the subtitle to: the adventure begins. Because they thought, the end of life as you know, it was too negative. But I've always been challenged by motherhood and trying to live the best life. And our country does not support it as a community, you know, parenting. We're like, 29th in regards to parental leave, and childcare. We have no childcare. And you know, all this stuff that relates to us as being defined by our bodies in this way. And so, for me, I would start venting to my community. I'm in this community of mothers that has kind of held back as women are not part of the overall power community. And so I would generally start with an essay, and then end up thinking: No, okay, this is expanding into a book. And my New York Times essay for Modern Love was similar in terms of what's love. It was about my breast cancer experience, but it expanded into kind of, I mean, weirdly, it expanded into this book, A Boob's Life, which is not about breast cancer, but that's certainly part of life as a woman with breasts over a period of life. So for me, the community, it wasn't that I chose: Oh, I'm gonna write about this or that. I always am struggling with questions to me personally. And I grew up in a suburb in the Midwest. And so that's where my origin story is. And that's, for me, that's the easiest place to really dig down deep into the emotional journey, as you say, that women's fiction specializes in.

Maggie Lynch 14:21

And I agree, and I think that's one of the reasons that women's fiction appeals to so many people. It is that women are speaking from a place that they're very familiar within themselves. So you actually made a great segue into your nonfiction book of Boobs Life. And I understand that, although it has a

humorous tone, that it is not just pure humor, you know, it's certainly a very serious topic. And as you just said, you've survived breast cancer. I have also. So that makes me immediately read your book.

Lisa Braxton 14:58

Me, too.

Leslie Lehr 14:58

So, there you go all three of us.

Maggie Lynch 15:02

And just the title drew me in, because breasts are such a visible part of our body. Breasts just kind of stand out more, and people judge you having to do with that. So can you just talk about, you know, writing that book and what you're trying to say and also why you chose a humorous tone as opposed to more of a lament.

Leslie Lehr 15:29

It's a memoir first, and I think that we can relate to a personal experience as a bonding experience for readers. Then, from there, I expand into the cultural analysis. And so the reader can kind of go on that journey and, you hit on an exact biological fact that, you know, the identifying body part of women is breasts. It's the first thing that enters a room. A man's eyes are drawn to women's breasts within 200 milliseconds. And that's a biological imperative for mating. And yet, the size of breasts is not relative to our ability to how much milk you know, our breasts make. I have so many fun, scientific facts, but essentially, I got out of the shower one night, and had recovered from breast cancer and was ready for date night and had gone through, you know, the hell of treatment. I was finally starting to be back and looked in the mirror and my breasts were not...they were, they didn't, they weren't, they didn't match. And I was so upset that my husband accused me of being obsessed and I was like, I am obsessed with breasts.

Maggie Lynch 16:34

Leslie Lehr 16:34

I'm a woman, how could that be? You know, and I think we all take us for granted. And so I shut up, and started watching TV with him. It's supposed to be date night, our first night together in our first home. We'd just been married a year when I got breast cancer. This was David Letterman's swan song. He's a famous intellectual comedian and he did a boob joke right at the top of his routine. And it was like, okay, it's not just me. Why are they laughing? Why are boobs funny? You know, and my husband. First I wanted to prove, do I really need to fix them? Are they broken? Why am I so obsessed. And I realized that every decade of my life from being a little girl, right after TV was invented, and Playboy, and training bras, and infant formula was used instead of breast milk to feed your young. And advertising attracting eyeballs for bigger breasts. And then you know, breast implants, and all this stuff, paralleled my life exactly from as a little girl wanting to have breasts and be Miss America. Then seeing the protest thing, you know, on TV. My mom is a feminist, but it didn't really work for her. And then being a teenager, and finally getting breasts and hiding them to work, you know, and showing them to

date, and using them as a mother, and then having them saggy and gross. And then after divorce, my mother talking me into getting a boob job. And then, you know, having breast cancer. So I could define my whole life in these stages that many women go through. And so I had to see why we were obsessed. And I realized by tracking my life and using it as this baseline, I could then expand out with the cultural analysis of how we got, as a nation, obsessed with breasts, and we take breasts for granted. Like, yeah, so what everyone has boobs, sorry. I had to change agents. It was a hard book to sell. I mean, but yeah, we all every morning, get up and have to decide what kind of bra to put on what we're going to do with our breasts, you know. And breast feed our children. And breasts can kill us. So it kind of rides this whole wave of what it's like to live in a woman's body, how political our bodies are in terms of how we rate in society, and ends up being about inclusionary feminism, which is really equality for everyone. And how our bodies, like you said, we judge ourselves. We judge other people, and that we can't really change the culture of wanting to be beautiful. It is part of the deal. But I think awareness of how we're treated because of our breasts, awareness of how we judge ourselves, and also issues like self care, that can really help us prevent breast cancer and how to help other people. So for me, I had to explore why I was obsessed with breasts and then it became a why is our nation obsessed? So it's a cultural memoir, really, with pop history. Well, thank you so much for explaining all of that. It makes me want to read it even more. And I think there are plenty of women who would be interested. There are obviously a lot of women who have survived breast cancer. And those who agree with your analysis. So I really appreciate that. So, I'd like to kind of segue, both of you are essayists. And I know, Lisa, that you've written short stories, I'm not sure, Leslie, whether you have. So Lisa, let's start with you. Having been a journalist you obviously are used to doing research and writing about topics. Can you tell me, do your essays inform your stories? Or do your stories inform your essays? Or are they kind of two different parts of your brain?

Lisa Braxton 20:09

They're not really two different parts of my brain because I my essays, some of them are somewhat political about racism, discrimination. I wrote an essay not long after the COVID shutdown, about social distancing. And the headline was: Social Distancing is Nothing New for Black Americans. And that was published in a publication called Cognoscenti, which is part of a public radio station. It's a type of you are there online blog. And it's that's the way it's been. I was thinking when social distancing came into the vernacular, I was thinking: well, gee, we've been doing that for years. My husband is African American, he always keeps a distance. If he sees a white woman walking in front of him, he keeps the distance or goes a different way. Because if he gets too close, then she's going to hold on to her purse or try to rush away from him. And that's even happening here at our condo complex. We've been here for seven years. And I do the same thing. I sometimes I'm thinking: well, okay, I see this white person walking, they're gonna think I'm up to something. So I'm going to slow down or go the other way. Right now I live outside of Boston. And just taking a walk, taking a walk on the campus of the condo complex and hearing the car doors go click click click like a symphony. Because here's a black person, she's going to try to break into our car. And then I look back into the past when my parents and I, my sister was a toddler at the time, were house hunting. We lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and my parents were interested in moving to a house in the suburbs. And I was maybe seven or eight years old. And we toured this house in Fairfield, Connecticut, nice home. And afterwards, we walked out the front door and the entire neighborhood up and down the street, all white, they're standing on their lawns, all the way up and down the street staring at us. And I said, Mommy, why are they standing there. And she

bristled. And then I remember the real estate agent was like, just flustered. I don't know why this is happening. I was too young to really get it. And so then we got in the car. And I noticed that my mother said to my father in very low voice, they don't want to us here, do they? He said, No, they don't. And my parents never moved to another house. They stayed in the same Cape Cod style house, you know, like, never, never moved. So those are the kinds of essays that I've written. I haven't done a short story in quite some time. But to compare it to *The Talking Drum* and the new novel that I'm writing, they're totally different. They're really, really different. And I think what it is, is that I enjoy the mental gymnastics, of going from something that's literally looking at the issues of the day, and looking at a story of historical fiction. And I think I enjoy making that leap into something totally different one from the other. And so I would say one does not feed the other.

Maggie Lynch 23:25

Yeah, that makes sense to me. I used to do short stories a lot. I don't anymore, but it's the same thing between nonfiction essays and short stories. They are very different parts of my mind. So, Leslie, you have written, I know, quite a few essays. I've read a couple of them. And they do seem to be, at least the ones I read, were, were in researching about women and women's shapes and, you know, feminist types of issues. So there would seem to be at least in terms of *A Boob's Life*, a little more of a connection there. But how about in terms of your fiction and your essays?

Leslie Lehr 24:05

There's definitely a connection for me. I wasn't even conscious of it until I looked. Actually, I was at a conference once after breast cancer and this woman from the Library of Congress, had all my books and somebody didn't show up. So it was just about my writing. And I, she had read all my stuff and like connected all these dots that I hadn't noticed, which was very cool. Except then I realized that she thought I was gonna die. And it was like a eulogy of everything I'd written cuz I was still, you know, my hair was just coming back. And it was kind of creepy. But she had pointed out that when I write essays, they really do seed. It's a nonfiction version of what then seeds my novel. So they are definitely something working out. That said, the *Modern Love* New York Times article that I wrote about, you know, thinking my husband thought I was sexy, and that's what attracted me and that he still loved me when I was bald kind of thing. That was the only thing I ever intended to write about breast cancer. I did not want to write a book about breast cancer. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't take notes, didn't take a journal, took no pictures. So it was kind of ironic when I was working on this book that my agent was like, oh, now you need to write more about that. That is part of the experience of women with breasts. So that's the only time I've noticed that connection. All my other essays are just stuff that bothers me. And so then I turn it into a fictional way where I can work out that question. My next book I'm working on is a novel, but it's also research based. And so I really do like mixing, you know, the emotions with what's going in the culture. And this book, this memoir, was tricky, because I had to, you know, kind of curate the experiences to form my thesis. It *Boob's Life* was originally thought of as a series of essays, a series of chapters that could be lifted and published. And then it seemed like it would be just a better story to really have them connect over my whole lifetime. But there are like fact pages in between, like the history of *Playboy*, the history of politics. And one of the good things about the fact that it didn't get published immediately, because people didn't know where to put it in memoir or nonfiction, right. It's hard to market. It didn't get, you know, a publishing deal. It had TV interest long ago, oddly, but it didn't get a publishing deal until a year ago, right before the lockdown. And so I was

able to include and expand experiences that both of my grown daughters had that echoed mine, and also the Me, too movement, and Time's Up, and Black Lives Matter and the election in the fall. I said, I'm not turning in my last my new last chapter until December 15. And I was able to really make it a whole story. So it is kind of short story-ish in terms of there are pretty entertaining set pieces of things that happened to me. But then I go into the cultural analysis with the research part. And then, you know, go back into it. There's probably one in between page that's pure little essay, but it's just a one page explanation of exactly why we're obsessed. And then everything else relates. But for me, it's very different. I really respect people into short stories. I've tried my hand at it, and I am just a long form story writer. It's either essay, which is personal essay, or it's a novel that's a much bigger story. So I can make things up. Because as you know, real life is random. And in fiction, you get to make things up for a reason, or you have to write. It's definitely for me a working ground of my next project.

Maggie Lynch 27:43

And I agree, I know one of the things I love about writing novels is that I get to control the world and I get to make things turn out how I want. In the real world it doesn't always turn out that way, or rarely does. One of the things you talked about, Leslie, is identity. And how that is a big thing for you. And Lisa, I would suspect in *The Talking Drum*, that identity, at least identity of place, which also has impact on our own identity, is important. So I wonder if each of you could just talk a little bit about identity and searching for identity, and how that works out in your books. Why don't we start with you, Lisa?

Lisa Braxton 28:26

Well, when you bring up identity, I think about my main character, Sidney who is trying to find her place in the world. She was in college, began law school, and married the professor. When they met he was not a professor in her department, so there was no conflict there. But then he decides that, because of racism, he did not get tenure. And so he decides that he's going to quit academia and move back to his hometown in the urban area, port city, and open up this bookstore. So she marries him and she decides to go ahead and put her law school on hold and come back there. They were in western Massachusetts, they move to Eastern Massachusetts, to start this business. So she's trying to find her way as a young bride. Someone who has led a pampered life and spoiled by her parents; and his life is much more gritty. So in the meantime, as the story progresses, she begins to find her voice in the marriage. For some time early on, he was able to bulldoze her in some decisions, which actually played out in my mind when my parents operated in the clothing store. My father would make decisions and my mother was saying that's not a good business decision. And he would say, I'm the boss so what I say goes. It's like, we're working together but we're married. What do we do? So my character, Sydney, was dealing with that at some point. She begins to find her voice and find where she wants to go career wise. So in that respect, identity did play in important part. I'm just thinking about my other characters. My immigrant characters, also had identity. Omar had to find where he was supposed to be. He wants to be the ambassador, the drumming Ambassador of the world. He introduces African drumming to that community, because historically at that time, there were not very many African drummers in the US. And the ones that came over sometimes they did very well. But sometimes, for the African American community, they were not accepted. Because some African Americans would say it was jungle music, we want nothing to do with it. So it was during that era. So Omar's trying to find his place and where he fits in, and where he could be successful. So I would say in those respects, and there are other characters, too, who were on their journeys, as well. But those are a couple of examples.

Maggie Lynch 30:49

Great! And can you, Leslie, kind of talk about, particularly in your fiction, you know, how that journey of identities important?

Leslie Lehr 30:58

Yes,. Well, obviously, my first nonfiction book was about kind of what the f*ck is... What is it like to be a mom when I was a career woman? And where am I? What's happening? I wrote a movie that came out about the same time, an independent film about a young sheltered woman who wondered what would it be like to be a worldly, wealthy woman. That was actually a murder mystery. And then my first novel, 66 Laps, the premise was about a young new mom at home thinking: who am I without my career? This wasn't what I planned. Is my husband cheating on me? I don't know. And then the other one was Wife Goes On. It is about a woman who makes three friends with other women who are getting a divorce. It asks who are you if you're not married, when your identity was I'm this mother or married woman. And suddenly, you know, this drastic change in your life. And then What A Mother Knows was a similar search of this woman who was actually a busy career woman, but a mother first. And when her daughter disappears, and she's in his car accident, and accused of murder, and can't find her daughter, who knows what happened, and what did she do? And, you know, it's like, Who am I without my daughter? And how do I matter? What did I do to be a good mother? You know, all those kind of questions of identity. And then my boobs book, seriously, is about how breasts define women in so many ways, through so many parts of our lives in ways that the whole culture takes for granted. So for me, it's all about gender identity, and sexual roles, and you know, how the female is treated because of this, this one particular body part that represents us and, you know, by our gender. So it's a, it's all about who am I? And why am I here? What's my purpose?

Maggie Lynch 32:47

I think for many women, that is an ongoing question throughout their life, (cough) just because also of the roles. But we change throughout life, you know. Who we are as a young woman and who we are as a mother is different, or in middle age, or in retirement like I am.

Leslie Lehr 33:11

And our bodies are, exactly, but also how the culture likes to see us. Whether it's racial, or gender, or just our identity. Women are kind of the old Freudian, Madonna whore, our bodies make us mothers and sweet, or sexy and tacky, or you know. But for real women we're very complex. And we have so many other roles. And I think that's part of why there's so many issues of Who am I now? And then and, you know, what is the stage of my life means to me as a person, you know. How's my womanhood defined?

Maggie Lynch 33:45

Oh, really wonderful. I have one final question before we close today. And that is what's coming up next for each of you. Are you writing another book? Working on a movie? What can we expect over the next year or so? Lisa, how about you?

Lisa Braxton 34:03

I have been working for several years now on a second novel. This one goes further back in history to the 1850s in Boston, the Beacon Hill area. Boston, where you have some fugitive slaves who now have been given the right to be free people of color. Some of them are, were in hiding, but they they kind of put that aside and they're they're working as entrepreneurs and, you know, working nine to five jobs, then you have some people who are slave catchers coming through who are trying to find these slaves, and you have abolitionists, and there was a lot of activity going on and Beacon Hill, and there was a black neighborhood there at one time. And that hasn't been explored very much in fiction. So that's something I'm working on. I'm really enjoying the process of digging back in history to see what it was like back then.

Maggie Lynch 34:55

Now that sounds very, very interesting. And I also will be interested to see how history informs people's journey even into the present.

Lisa Braxton 35:11

Yeah, I need to make it relatable to contemporary audiences. Definitely.

Maggie Lynch 35:15

And, Leslie, what's coming up next for you?

Leslie Lehr 35:18

Well, the audio book just came out two weeks ago, and I narrated it. So next I gotta listen to it, see how it is to hear the story, when I was crying or laughing or whatever. And then I'm starting to speak to universities, hoping the book is used as a text for Gender Studies. And the, you know, television show is in development, or in the pilot stage. And that's a long ordeal. You know, hopefully, that will really happen. And I'll be executive producer. So I'll get to have a role in who plays me and what my boobs say. And then the paperback comes out next year. But honestly, right now, I'm doing so much promotion from this book. It's very weird to have a COVID book. I mean, the whole thing came out, and everything I've done is online. But I'm very eager to get back to what I was working on. I am working on another novel. And it has a lot of the same themes of identity. It has to do with both race and gender and relationships in the late 60s. And it's a book that I've been wanting to write forever. And finally, enough people are dying that I can write it. I can fictionalize it to actually have all their points of view and really explore the dynamics further. So I'm eager to get back to that. And I think the boobs obsession is my piece out there, my mission in the world for women to stop being so judgmental of ourselves and practice better self care, and, you know, love our bodies, even when they're not prepubescent. And to be more empowered and, you know, fight for legislation that's going to help us. I feel like this is a book that I'm going to always be promoting and trying to get the message out. And every woman needs to get a mammogram. It is going to be one woman every day, good for me. I work with stand up to cancer and breast disease. So it's kind of my evergreen mission book. And then the next book will be a lot of fun exploring this period, and same dynamics. And as you were saying, Lisa, I think the issues--and I'm exploring the late 60s, and a lot of it is based on real stuff that happened--are still exactly what's still happening today, We're still talking about reparations. We're still having issues of political, you know, who's in charge and who's not and how, you know, where the power lies. And the love and the betrayal of relationships. And I do think that as much as we've made progress in women's

fiction, for the basis of the stories, we're all still back in Sense and Sensibility, And all the these same themes are still relevant. So by going backwards, we're just giving people another another angle to see what's happening today in our lives. We are still people who have the same emotions and needs for independence and liberation and power. And, you know, love.

Lisa Braxton 38:01

So let me let me ask you, Leslie, really quickly, how does a writer get a deal with HBO? How does that happen?

Leslie Lehr 38:07

That was total luck! You know, I've been a screenwriter before. I'm in the Guild. But I haven't written screenplays for a long time. Because I found, as a woman, it was incredibly difficult. I was in production for a long time. Nobody wanted my stories. And then I thought, oh, write books and maybe they'll get picked up. I did sell a couple of screenplays. But this was somebody who I knew by first name ain a parenting group. I was actually helping her with her writing. I'm a writing consultant. I work with Trilby Writers Studio, and I help people write pitch letters and, and proposals. And I was reading her book for free, and just gave her some notes, because she was a friend that I knew. And so she said: Let me read what you're writing. And I gave her his book. It did not sell in the proposal. And so finally I was frustrated. And I just wrote the whole book. And so I gave her draft even before I sent it to my agent. And she loved it and said, You know, I know some people that I can shop it around to. And my agent was like, No, don't do that! And I was like, what I got to lose, you know. Usually it's a best seller that gets this treatment. I've never had a best seller. I always get published, you know, but I'd love to have a best seller. But meanwhile, she did know some people and got it to Salma Hayek who loved it. So Salma Hayek and Dolly Parton, for me, are the boob heroes of the world. These are major feminists working for the greater good and use their boobs for power. So yeah, it was just you know, great. Everything I've really sold has kind of been that way, where it's just a matter of talking to people and building relationships and taking chances. So it was just a lucky thing and she believed in it. Aand honestly, when I thought is this a stupid book to write you know, in the throes of rejections, her belief in it kept me going. And like she's been working for free still, unless it happens, you know, unless it actually gets made and is on the air. So it gave me a lot of faith. And so it was just one of those weird, Lucky things, you know. This whole book was neem like that night. This book has been a very odd journey. And so I want to just believe that it was meant to be and hopefully will help some people. But um, there's, I mean, I would say your book has won a bunch of awards. So you could probably have your agent or your publisher, right now get it in the pipeline. They want a lot of products, and you could do the formal away and get a film agent for it. And I'd be happy to refer you to mine. So I got them after the fact, though. I never did anything the right way. But now I do have a lawyer in my corner and things like that. And it's just.. there's so much luck involved, really. So I'm just this one. So far, I've been lucky. We'll see. We'll see if it sells the works. I don't know, my baby is the book. Whatever else happens is gravy, you know,

Lisa Braxton 40:54

So just having the right connections, and just timing and luck.

Leslie Lehr 40:56

And not even having correct connections. But making connections, talking about it, trying to be out there. And believing in yourself, for me, is really hard. And like, Who cares? Nobody's wanting to hear about boobs. And suddenly, everyone was caring about boobs. And it's so it's like, yeah, see, I thought so. But your, your book is fantastic. And I'm sure that, you know, if you just keep making the phone calls and connecting with people, it's, you know, you'll be there too. And, and then then the next book will be easier.

Maggie Lynch 41:29

Lisa, that's an invitation from Leslie for you to take advantage of her and her connections. You have to do that. Because there really is a lot of need for content because there's so much cable now. So it's not just you know, for network television, it's not just the big studios. And, for that matter, I mean, you know, you have Netflix, and everyone's now coming up with original content like Netflix, Amazon, Apple TV. So there's a lot of places to sell. And you just need to find some people who know where all those places are.

Leslie Lehr 42:04

Somebody who loves your project.

Maggie Lynch 42:08

So, we've run out of time for today. So let me thank both of you, truly, for participating in this special conversation in celebration of women's fiction. It's been a pleasure getting to know you and your books.

Leslie Lehr 42:22

No, thank you so much. It's really an honor. I remember when the first founders of the women's fiction Association, you know, founded it, and it's been just wonderful to see it grow and be a part of it. So thank you.

Maggie Lynch 42:35

Thank you. You're quite welcome. And to my listening audience, thank you for listening to Dust Jackets: Conversations with Authors. Don't forget to check the show notes for everything happening on Women's Fiction Day, June 8th. And also in the notes will be things about how to contact both of these authors, learn more about their books, and what's going on in their lives. See you next time.