Wild Girls Transcript

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In Conversation with: Elizabeth Adan (EA)
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Description: Transcript of the podcast of a discussion about the book, Wild Girls between author, Mary Stewart Atwell of English and Elizabeth Adan of art history.

[Music]

Karen Lauritsen (Moderator): [Background Music] Welcome to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on April 18th 2014 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Mary Stewart Atwell and Elizabeth Adan discussing Mary Stewart Atwell's debut novel, Wild Girls published by Scribner in 2012. Mary Stewart Atwell who goes by Polly, has had her short fiction included in Epoch and Alaska Quarterly Review. And in the anthologies Best New American Voices and Best American Mystery stories. She teaches English at Cal Poly. Joining Polly is Elizabeth Adan, associate professor of art history at Cal Poly. Liz has an interdisciplinary PhD in contemporary art, religion and cultural analysis with a Doctoral emphasis in women studies from U.C. Santa Barbara. In this podcast, Polly reads from Wild Girls and together with Liz explores her character's lenses on the world particularly as they relate to anger.

[Music]

[Applause]

MA: Thank you so much Karen. I'd like to thank the Cal Poly author's series for inviting me to speak today, and also Liz Adan for agreeing to be my conversation partner and for taking time out from a well-earned sabbatical to read and think about my book. We're here today to talk about Wild Girls, but since I have a few students in the audience, I thought I'd begin more generally by talking about how I became a fiction writer and how my early ideas about what kind of writer I was worked their way into this debut novel. For me, unlike some writers, writing fiction wasn't my first choice as a career. I remember saying when I was three or four that I wanted to be a doctor. The main reason as far as I can recall is that I like saying the word stethoscope which in retrospect should have been a sign that I was more inclined to the language side of things. The first time I told anyone I wanted to be a writer was when at age seven, I place second in the National American Girls story contest. I wrote a story about my American Girl doll, Samantha, who is described on the current website as, a Victorian Beauty who makes the difference. I have no idea what my almost winning story was about. But I do know that when I told my mother I was going to grow up to write books, she seemed to accept it as a worthwhile and reasonable ambition. In fact, over the 25 years that elapsed between that first success and the publication of my first book, she never suggested that being a fiction
writer was impractical or out of my reach. And since I'm what therapists describe as a people pleaser, I don't know what I would have done if anyone had indicated to me that succeeding was unlikely. If I'd been discouraged at that point I probably would have gone with my first instincts and pursued a field based on the sound of the word, becoming a Lobotomous or an Actuary or a Meilleur. Something a little more interesting to say. If you'd ask me then, what writers do my answer would have been a very simple one, they tell stories. Like most young readers, I was aware of the books I was reading only on that level. In books, things happen. And the best ones, both the things that happen and the people they happen to would be interesting and compelling. I could have told you that much but many years would go by before I'd understand that writers were doing something else besides arranging a plot, they were manipulating language. When I was 11, my next door neighbor sneaked me her parent's copy of Salem's Lot by Stephen King. I haven't read it since, but I remembered one scene well enough that I was able to find it just from a Google search. In this particular moment in the book, a man stands in the shadow of a doorway looking at a woman on the bed. She's wearing blue nylon underwear and nothing else and she smiles, inviting him in. As he approaches her, a cicada buzzes in the woods outside the window. And the scene stops there and I will too for obvious reasons. Every writer I know has the experience of reading a forbidden book like this and what the novelist Emily Danforth calls "Secrets Gulps". And perhaps the privacy of that reading experience made the scene feel even more elicit and exciting. Almost certainly I realized that the actions of these characters implied sex and my curiosity and confusion about that added to the effect. What I know for sure is that years and decades later when I couldn't have told you the plot of "Salem's Lot" or a single—the name of a single major character, I remember the cicada, the blue underwear, the hush tension of that figure in the doorway. It was at that moment that I become conscious of a writer in act of writing. I've never read that scene with my fiction students but if I did, I would point out the way the King appeals to the reader's senses adding together a color, texture and sound to produce a sense of real experience. I would break the theme down into its component parts demonstrating a reading process that reveals the story as a series of decisions made by the writer in the act of writing. For readers attuned to these decisions, I would tell them this narrative of composition can compete with the narrative of events, the plot, and interest and excitement. King had created a tangible experience for me on the page. And as a young reader, I had become aware of myself reacting to that creation and I knew that that was what I wanted to do. At the beginning of the quarter I often do an exercise with my fiction students where I ask them to picture the root they took to get to campus that day, walking or driving. Then I ask whether anybody can tell me three things that they noticed during the walk or drive. You could try it right now if you want to. It's actually really hard—hard for me. Then I tell them that part of the business of the fiction writer is to be awake to those impressions, those observations. That it is the material that both our lives and our stories are made of. Before King could write the passage I talked about a minute ago he had to observe the slant of light on a summer afternoon, the pitch of a cicada, the tactility of fabric. He had to sluff off the routine that keeps us from seeing those things. I was lucky to learn this lesson at a pretty young age when I had a poetry teacher, who whenever the room got quiet liked to sneak up behind somebody and smack his hand on their desk and say, "Pay attention." I figured out pretty quickly that he wasn't just saying pay attention to me, your teacher. He was telling us that if we wanted to be writers we had to pay attention to everything. Years later, I've
learned that this is what in Buddhism is called mindfulness, the practice of calm awareness of
the world and of oneself. I'm not a practicing Buddhist and I never smack my students' desks.
But as a teacher of writing I feel that this is one of the most important principles that I can pass
on. The ability to shut down the clatter of memories, wishes, and opinions that usually fill our
brains and actually tune in to what's going on around us is one of the greatest abilities I think
that a writer can have. It's a practice I attempt and fail at every single day. I was fortunate to
grow up in a really beautiful part of the country, the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia where, as
on the central coast you really can't turn a corner without encountering some kind of stunning
natural landscape. I'd like to turn to the book now which is set in that part of the country and
read you a short excerpt that, in my opinion, speaks to some of the principles I've been talking
about here—the importance of visual detail and fiction and also the way that the awareness of
our environment can start to shape character. First, I'll set it up pretty briefly for those of you
who don't know the book. The narrator is named Kate, she is 17. She has a friend named
Willow, who she really looks up to. Willow is kind of snotty, but Kate thinks she's wonderful.
Both she and Willow are interested in the same boy, who's named Mason. And in this part of
the book they go on a few kind of awkward group dates, and he seems to be deciding which of
them he wants to get involved with. "I wasn't sure how Willow would feel about Mason's plan
to take us for a drive. But at 2:30 on Friday we were right where he told us to be, sitting on an
old millstone outside the abandoned house near the Laurel Creek trail ahead. It was a kind of
place that usually freaks me out. The roof was half-gone, the broken window was foaming with
trumpet vine. Though I'd never heard any stories associated with this place, it had an air of old
violence, a smell, almost. The mailbox beside the front door swung from one rusty nail and the
doors itself was a hair ajar, a black sliver of shadow visible between the lock and the doorframe.
Listening to the wind shake the trees made me—itchy with nerves, but what then they—" Sorry, "then we heard the growl of Mason's car coming around the bend, and Willow turned
to me and grinned. Willow's new interest in spending time with me was a surprise, but
strangest of all was the way she kept complimenting me in front of Mason. Over weeks, in a
series of artful side comments, she led him to understand that I was the only girl she knew who
could drive a stick shift, that I had been the best offensive player on the soccer team before I
hurt my knee, that I had the third highest GPA in our class. I knew this meant she didn't
consider me as threat, but I enjoyed it anyway, and I couldn't help noticing that Mason aimed
his melancholy smile at me more often. I started wearing my hair down on Fridays,
painstakingly curling the ends with a $2 curling iron I found at Goodwill. At another thrift store,
I picked up a pair of jeans that Willow said made my butt look tight. Clancy Harp hadn't called
me to go to the movies like he said he would, but I told myself I didn't care. I didn't want to sit
through some dumb comedy at the Moorefield multiplex. I wanted to be with Willow and
Mason, who made me feel that I didn't have to wait for college for my life to begin. That here,
sandwiched in the ugly front seat of the El Camino, I was already the person I wanted to
become. Most days, Mason took us on what he called the Junk Tour of Swan River. We never
went as far as Bloodwort Farm but we went everywhere else. Around the academy, through the
dull quiet streets where I'd grown up, and finally down to the swampy muddle of the Delta
sprawled along the riverbank. We visited old family graveyards, an empty building that used to
house a hardware store, the shell of the potato chip factory that closed last year. There is no
discernible method to the Junk Tour, only a common reference to what spoke of rack and ruin,
failure and collapse. Along with features of the man-made landscape, Mason pointed out what he called signs, birds or trees or arrangements of cloud that he claimed could be read to tell the future. He said that his mom had learned about these things from her own grandmother and that the ability to interpret them was a talent passed down through generations. After showing us one trailer with the yard full of toilet-bowl planters and another with a dollhouse-size replica of Graceland by the mail box, Mason had parked to the state-designated scenic location overlooking the car graveyard. The three of us were balanced on the guard rail, Willow and I with our hands punched deep in the pockets of our jackets, hoods turned up against a cold dark mist. "Look at that," Mason said with a mixture of shame and satisfaction. "The government puts up a special sign saying that this is a great view, and them some asshole comes along and screws it up with a bunch of wrecked cars and a tire dump." Below us, the piney slope ran into a declivity that was bare of trees, the land shinning with heaps of twisted bumpers and broken shards of windshield. I had heard that Billy Thorpe, who owned this dump along with the Tastee-Freez, trucked in wrecks from as far away as Moorefield. The sky filled with flushed crows that seemed for that moment to hang motionless, like a handful of gravel thrown in the air. "Kate, maybe you should do your environmental activism around here," Willow said. Leaning around me, she told Mason, "After college, Kate wants to go and help out a bunch of third-world countries. Like show them how to build drainage systems or something. She's going to save the world. You should hear our science teacher talk about her. He thinks she's the greatest things since curly fries." I knew this was supposed to be a complement like all the others, but I caught a mocking undertone. Willow understood why I wanted to get out of Swan River, but she couldn't understand wanting to make the world a better place. To her it was a peculiar, faintly outrageous inclination, like a taste for clove cigarettes or kissing other girls. Mason picked up a stick and tossed it into the ravine. It was unseasonably cool but while we were in sweaters and rain jackets, Willow even had a pair of pink cashmere gloves. He was dressed in his usual jeans and t-shirt. Looking back I'm sure he wore those clothes because he didn't have any others. But because he was so handsome with those goldish eyes and high-boned face. Because he had a weight lifter's chest and shoulders from summer construction work. Because he kept you on your toes harsh and mocking one moment, kind and funny the next. Because, in other words, he was Mason Lemons, you never questioned what he wore. "She's right," he said to me. "You want to help somebody, help your own people first." "But these aren't her people," Willow said. And I sent her a silent thank you for not making me say it myself. “They’re not my people either. Just because you’re born in one place doesn’t mean you have to stay there forever. You can go anywhere you want to.” Mason smiled down at the copper colored carpet of needles bellow the guardrail. "Not me," he said. "Yes you could," I chimed in. "You could go to college, even if you had to start at MCC you could transfer after a year or two." Mason shook his head, smoke drifting around his hand. "Look at that," he said pointing at a black bird with a startling red patch hoping from branch to branch in the tree above us. "That's what the old people call a shiver burn. You see one of those in the day time it means somebody is going to die." So this isn't the most dramatic content in the book. I haven't even talked about the girls who set things on fire. This is what stands out to me in retrospect. These are characters who are deeply marked by where they come from and even that—more than that by their own perceptions about what that place means. Whether Mason is right in his prediction doesn't really matter much, it's what he sees and how he interprets the environment
that counts. This year as the East Coast and the Midwest suffered through an excruciating winter, I thought a lot about how little this central coast environment expects of us. We don't have to complain about sprawl or traffic or smog, except for bemoaning the drought, we hardly ever have to ever think about the weather. It's the only place I've ever lived where literary every walk or drive can be a pleasant, aesthetic experience. In a way, this perfection makes paying attention harder, but also I think more important. Even on a great day like this, I can't get over how lucky I am to have such an opportunity for developing the sense of awareness that I feel is so important to my work as a writer. I feel so fortunate to be here at Cal Poly and to be here with you today. Thank you.

[Applause]

EA: So, that was a great place to begin. I'm going to start, I have prepared some questions and we'll see how far we get with them, but I took the title of the novel as a kind of guide post for thinking about what I wanted to talk about today in relation to the book. And so, I think, before we go any further, especially for those of us who haven't read the novel. It's important to articulate what wildness is in the context of the book and how might one or more of the characters in the universe of the novel describe wildness or what it means to be wild and specifically to be a wild girl?

MA: I think that's a great question Liz. It's the one that, in some ways I avoided when I was thinking about the book because I felt that if I reduce the metaphor too much, I would kind of lose its power to act within the novel. I didn't want to say it's this thing, you know, and then sort of shut down possibilities for it to be other things [laughs], if that makes any sense. But I guess, one thing that I—that I thought about a lot, both from my own teenage years and from a time when I was teaching high school and kind of observing my students was just the fact that I don't think we have a lot of language for talking about aggression and anger in women, maybe especially young women. Even if we look at, you know, to go a little further a field, sociology or criminology, I think, you know, what it says is certain women don't commit crimes, right? Women aren't violent. But sometimes they are or sometimes they might want to be. And I think we need a language for that, right? We have so much literature, so many stories about men and boys acting out. And I did—I did see that in women I knew and I just felt like there wasn't really a place for it. And of course in Wild Girls, that wildness is very exaggerated but for me it was an opportunity to write about kind of those things.

EA: And in the novel, wildness is not a metaphor for—not just a metaphor, I should say, for rage and for adolescent young women's rage and sense of powerlessness. It is an actual phenomenon, it does transpire in the novel that young women who become wild girls literary light things on fire and seem to take on kind of supernatural or extrasensory power of some kind, it's not literary ESP in that sense, but they do things as wild girls that I, for example, as an angry young woman, when I was an adolescent, could not do. I could not light things on fire by touching them. I could not wreak havoc, at least not in the literal, physical sense unless I did other things than simply kind of existed in the world. So, it's one of the things that sets—certain young women in the novel apart from others and it's the source of propound, by my reading at
least, anxiety for Kate, the narrator, about she desperately wants not to become a wild girl at least, it seems to be in all of that access that we have to her both mental life and her lived reality within the context of the novel. So, I'm also interested in one of the things again, I come from not just in our history but also in studies background and so, I'm very interested in this, again, wildness and the question of girls and gender and how gender and wildness kind of inform one another or interact with one another in the novel. It seems to be at least, in the universe of the novel it seems like wildness is specific to girls and also to age and location and which I have some questions about those things as well. But what is that relationship between wildness and gender, both in the universe of the novel and for you as the author? What kind of work, how did that wildness take shape in relation to gender or how did the gender identities in the novel maybe take shape in relation to wildness as well?

MA: I think we know within the world of the novel that there are men misbehaving too, you know. Misbehaving is a terrible word for it but—

EA: Acting criminally also, yes.

MA: Yeah, acting criminally. So Mason has been in jail and there are other men in the novel who there is some criminal behavior. So for me that was like—that was something with unavailable context. But one of the characters—I was happy Liz told me that she was her favorite character in the book, Caroline, who's Kate's best friend, and she's my favorite character too. She said something about being a young woman has everything to do with being powerless, right, that's what the state of mind is. So, if you give people in that position power, what are they going to do with it? Some of course would act very reasonably and responsibly with it, but this book is about people who don't know how to manage it because they've never in a position—been in a position where they could make anything happen. Where they could act on the world in any kind of way. So that's something that goes wrong for them.

EA: Right. Caroline even has a passage in which she says to become—well, Caroline is fascinated by the wild girls and approaches then with—from my sense—in a kind of ethnographic fascination. And as a young woman in the boarding school context—as a high school student that basically thinks she's going to go on and get a PhD and, kind of, something like hope her studies and do her dissertation on the wild girls or a phenomena like the wild girls. But there's a moment when she and Kate are talking about the wild girls where she mentions—she said—Kate has just told her I think the story of Kate's sister had become a wild girl and survived it which not all of the wild girls do. And so Kate tells her the story that's kind of been a secret, not completely a secret but a kind of public secret at the school and Caroline didn't know about it. And so Kate tells her the story and Caroline is fascinated by it, of course, and taking notes, mentally, I don't remember if she's literally taking notes or not. But it also says it would be like becoming another person, at least for that timeframe and which one was wild. And that struck me again. And, thinking about the question of power and adolescence, girlhood adolescence and not having power and how to gain power would somehow feel like being different, like not even being oneself in some way. So it seems to be against the—central to these questions of identity and adolescent and age, which relate. I also want to ask a little bit more about the
young men in the novel and how they do or don't relate to wildness. If you have anything to say about that. I'm thinking specially about both Mason and Clancy who are really the only two young men in the novel although there are other, of course, male characters as well, they're mostly peripheral but Travis hates his mother's boyfriend who's the Deputy Sheriff in Swan River, Dr. Bell, the teacher at the school, head master who is also obsessed with the wild girls and wildness, I think that's a generous way to put it. And other even more peripheral male characters, fathers of other students at the school and other men as well. Was there anything to say about men in wildness in Wild Girls?

MA: Well, I guess something I'm teaching women's literature along with fiction writing this quarter and one thing that we've been talking about is, I think sometimes we talk about gender construction, we talk about femininity was the only thing that was constructed, right? But this was sort of socially determined, but men were free to be whatever they wanted. And I feel like that's an important thing for me to talk about with my students and I think in the book too that the men in the novel are just as limited in some ways in their choices and just as affected by the place they come from and the pressures that that entailed. So they're not at the center of the book because it really is sort of about community between women to some extent. But I feel like I wanted to show that, for them, getting out of this environment is just as challenging in a way.

EA: Yeah. And in fact—spoiler alert, I'm going to go ahead and spoil—Mason who feels that he cannot escape and it feels, also that the wild girls are going to get him somehow, in fact, to commit suicide, in the novel, and so does not escape, in any—in any way, either metaphorically or literally in terms of his own sense of powerlessness and relation to control over his own life. I also wanted to ask and just full disclosure probably it seemed the questions that I wrote today, so. I'm going to read this one a little more closely because I want to make sure I get this one right because I think it's an important one. So, throughout most of the novel, Kate is convinced that age is also a key factor in relation to becoming wild. And she seems to have a sense that she might be able to escape becoming wild again which is really very important to her by attaining a particular age and 18 is an age that she does name at a certain moment though I'm not sure that's necessarily what she picks but that's at least one point where she mentions that if she could just get to a certain age, she would no longer be under this threat of becoming wild. But at the end of the novel, in the epilogue where she's—and her narrative voice is reflecting back on her life and the story, the account that she's provided for us in the narrative. She describes a promise or a pack that she makes with herself in which she acknowledges—and this is a direct quote in her voice, "The wild girl is with me always." Meaning it's carried over in some way into her adulthood, into her post-college years and her career as an environmental justice activist. At least, that's my reading of her career in the novel. So I want us to maybe talk a little bit about what this acknowledgment does to her earlier assumption throughout the novel that the links—there are these links between wildness and youth—and her youth that instead, somehow that wildness was carried with her throughout her life. Another way to put this is, to what degree might this ladder kind of retroactive acknowledgment recast wildness throughout the book as something different from or more than the actual, again, the very real physically destructive behavior that wildness is throughout the bulk of the novel, again, as
we're reading through it until we get to the epilogue. That's really, I think, centrally what wildness is, is this young women—the young women who enact this rage, powerlessness through physical—very physical destruction—often extreme violence, and death, and often their own death as well—many of the wild girls don't survive—so what does that do, that acknowledgment, at the end of the novel, to how we might think about wildness as the reader of the novel?

MA: I thought that was such a great question and an interesting thing for me to think about. I felt really uncertain about the last line. And then since the book’s come out, that's one thing that a lot of people comment on. The writer, Karen Russell, who gave me a really nice blurb like when she e-mailed me, she said like, "Oh, the last line, like, it makes it all work."

EA: Right.

MA: And that's really nice to hear. For me, Kate is a little bit of an unreliable narrator there.

EA: OK.

MA: She-- And I don't want to spoil too much but she has constructed her own life in a way where she hasn't ever really gotten out. She's left physically but she hasn't left emotionally. And I think, in a way, she feels like she was denied an experience that might have made her a more whole person in some ways. And so I think even, you know, even in her 30s, she—she can't get away from it. She can't get passed what happened to her as an adolescent. And I think that's true for somebody—some people, it's not true for everyone and I think for a lot of us, thank God, you know, maturity and peace do come with getting older. But at least, at this point, she hasn't allowed herself to experience that. I want to—again, I won't give too much away but I want to leave her a little bit out in the last chapter. I think there's a possibility that things will get better for her but that's where she is right now.

EA: That's interesting to hear you weigh in on it that way because, again, her sister, I have—i'm clearly not averse to spoilers. Her sister is—does go become briefly a wild girl who survives and—but also seems to be then, and has a difficult kind of—which we don't really see much of in a novel, but leaves Swan River, basically drops out of high school after this experience, leaves Swan River, spends her—a couple of years traveling around the country sending postcards back to her family, but after she's left various places so they kind of keep track of her but not really track her down, does come back to Swan River, but also has made that as a conscious decision, at least, by my reading of the exchanges between Kate and Maggie in the book, and does seem really quite satisfied in many ways with the life that she leads and has a sense of being kind of grounded in a different way and not still in this kind of intense relationship with her adolescent years in the same way that that last passage of the book seems to suggest Kate might still be really still kind of tied to or shaped by her adolescence even in her 30s which, again, I think is interesting to become. And Kate does have these moments of discussions with her sister where they talk about is kind of, how Kate seems to be comparing their lives and finding Maggie's wanting compared to what Kate wants her own life to be. However, it's again it's not so clear in
her epilogue how far we could say Kate has come from Swan River and from her adolescence even, kind of, it looks like she has kind of, at first glance, around the surface.

MA: Which is—

EA: Yeah.

MA: —I can respond to that briefly. I mean, I think—not that I was thinking about this metaphorically while I was writing, but I think there is some truth to the fact that, you know, probably as an adult, the less time you spend thinking about all the different people you could have been, probably, the happier you are [laughs].

EA: Right [laughs].

MA: And I think Kate thinks her sister Maggie is not very bright, you know, that's why she's been willing to settle for a simple life. But I think you're absolutely right, in a way, Maggie is the smart one. She said this is where I am and I'm satisfied with that and that's—yeah, something that Kate hasn't gotten to yet.

EA: Yeah. Yeah. In addition to age and gender, the thing that seems most concern, not just for Kate, but for all of the characters in the book, I think there seems to be, at least, some consensus that it's the location, that is what determines, what gives rise to Wildness. That Swan River, specifically, and maybe it's general vicinity, but Swan River is this site or source, or again, kind of constitutive factor in what—how one becomes wild, that one becomes wild. And it's from the very first sentence in the novel. Again, there is this kind of way that the novel defines Swan River as being characterized by this phenomenon of the wild girls and its lengthy history. There are three examples, by my reading, that act of wildness, of wild girls that actually happen in the narrative timeframe of the novel. But again, there are many historical figures, accounts that are also kind of noted and mentioned and referenced in various contexts. So the location is, is very important and, well we already touched on this somewhat, but it's central to wildness in the novel and thus it's another great source of anxiety for Kate and she has this pressing kind of desire, need to leave Swan River which, again, I'm going to go ahead and spoil it for you all [laughter]. She does, although we don't see much of that. That's not a huge component but actual departure. But her time away from Swan River isn't. But what's interesting for me, at least, is that Kate is also attuned to location in this alternative way because she's, from her high school years, interested in environmental justice, environmental studies, and one of her projects in the novel as a high school student is, she forms an environmental justice student group and does these various projects that are meant to improve the ecological conditions of Swan River, of her surrounding, her location. So that seemed, to me, to create an interesting kind of attention, or a kind of, tension is maybe not quite the right word, but kind of, almost a conundrum that Kate, herself, doesn't seem to be aware of in the novel. Although, if I've missed that, please cue me to that. But how—what is it that the location is both a place that she's really worried, anxious about, really wants to leave, but also a place that she has this sense of care for. And this relationship that she wants to make it better and I think—and, and does. This
is one thing that she does actively do and does make some perhaps minor but still not unsubstantial changes in terms of thinking about the environment, thinking about the ecology of Swan River, for lack of a better way to put it. So, can you shed some insight or give us some other kind of ways that you think about that as the novelist or some insight into Kate as the character who, of course, you know her voice better than any of us.

MA: Thank you. Well, I did touch on this in the talk. I've been thinking a lot about this year, about the Central Coast and Appalachia, where I come from, because I come from a very ugly part of the Midwest [laughs] and I was so happy to get to this place that was so gorgeous and I've been remembering my home a lot. And I think what I notice a lot when I look around here is how incredibly well managed this area is. That it's developed in a very smart way. And, I mean, I think a lot of that's just California. And I'm sure a lot of you guys heard, West Virginia—very close to where I grew up, where my husband grew up—they had chemicals in the water supply several months ago that made it undrinkable for several months. And the company that caused that has not been held accountable, will not be held accountable because of the way the state government is tied up with the coal corporation. And, so to me, this is really, you know, where the autobiographical part of the book comes in that I just—I feel a little bit homicidal [laughter] when I think about that. Just what a treasure of the physical beauty of that part of the country is and how it’s been just exploited and taken for granted to the point now where it's ruined, I mean, for generations. So I think Kate is very rightly, very angry about that and she does try to sort of make it her life's work to do something about it. But I think, you know, when everything is against you, you're fighting the tide, and I think that adds to her frustration and her sense of powerlessness that this is a fight that she's not going to really be able to make any kind of impact in.

EA: Right. And we get that sense again in the epilogue where she talks about her work where she pursues this as a career, in some ways, as well. But there's also that passage that, you know, that shed some light on it for me, where she's—it's one of the breaks, I think, maybe spring break. She's staying with her mother rather than on campus, which is the boarding school. She's going for a run every day and she talks about she's bringing, right? She's going out on this round and she's running some of the trails and she's picking up soda cans and every run, she comes back with her pockets full of empty chip bags and soda cans. But then it also—as if it was going to make any difference. There's some—at the end of that, she makes some comment like that to herself, that it seems like it's impossible, right, that she's also powerless in relation to that as well and she has that moment, also, after she has that interview for the scholarship. She talks about this having found that this social activist environmental group on campus, which is her big accomplishment and she's up for a scholarship and does this interview and after the interview says as if, you know, they care about this little, you know, kind of, you know—it belittles this accomplishment as, again, many adolescent do and many adults do, as well, actually. But there is—I had not made that connection to the powerlessness quite in the same way with her environmental activities but I see it now a little bit differently, so thank you that I get some light on that for me. I'm going to shift gears now from the novel to think, you know, a little bit more generally or broadly about writing and ask probably a couple of questions. She's already touched quite a bit on writing in her introduction but I also am curious
in this one is especially interesting for me and the point I’ve talked about this a little bit already, but I'm sure people in the audience would also like to hear what, to what degree, if at all, being a writer has also shaped your experience as a reader, either of your own work or, of course, of other people's work. And again, you mentioned this even with novel in your intro. But I'm also curious, of course, maybe it’s just me but I think many people might share this, other authors that informed the writing of *Wild Girls* or that you are especially interested in or kind of feel a connection to yourself as a writer.

MA: Sure. Well, I think, all writers are readers before they are writers and it's—I mean it’s the most important. I always tell my students that, that is the most important thing you can do for your writing is read, widely, read deeply, you know, and closely. And I feel like it's almost like advice for me now because, you know, I teach full time and I have a two year old and so if I get to read after he goes to bed, it's like it's so exciting this experience with a novel [laughter]. So, you know, I need to make that part of my life. It’s just really fulfilling for me. In terms of this book, I was thinking a lot. I think there are a lot of contemporary authors who bring the fantastic elements of what we might usually consider fantasy into a realistic environment in a way that was really inspiring for me. So I mentioned Karen Russell, who I adore. Donna Tartt, who won the Pulitzer this week for *The Goldfinch*, I don't know if any of you guys have heard of her. She's awesome. Her first novel is called *The Secret History* and it's about a group of college students who enact these Greek sort of a practice and with a calling down of a god based on what they know of Greek mythology and it works. And that was a big book for me as a teenager and young adult. So I really—I think that, you know, some people will call this the post-realist area. There’s no reason why we just have to stay in the world where only what we know is possible if possible. So bringing in these other possibilities is just really exciting to me. Yeah.

EA: I'm also just going to mention, we don’t have to talk about it but that you also—you sent me the link for and have a short essay on the work of an author who's often considered more a young adult author, although I’m not sure that that classification holds up, that in certain ways, any more. But on the work of Lois Duncan, who—she’s still alive today actually—but wrote most of her work in the late 1960s, 1970s into the 1980s. And a particular novel that, again, we have to confine this short essay that Polly wrote about Duncan’s novel *Daughters of Eve* which there are some not close resemblance but some structural maybe resemblance as to some of the things that happened in *Wild Girls*. I love reading that essay because I was an avid Lois Duncan reader as a young woman, so and when Polly mentioned this I said, “I—please send, I want to read it, like, this is very exciting to me,,” since those were some novels that shaped my adolescent years in some important ways.

MA: I’m just curious. Maybe I can do an informal vote. Do you guys know Lois Duncan?

EA: Anybody else know like Lois Duncan or just the two of us up here in the room?

MA: We’re the little fan club. [Laughter]
EA: It's just us. It's just us, OK. So all—and actually her—one of her novels was the basis for that film that's now, I think, been made into like 14 sequels, _I Know What You Did Last Summer_, which is nothing—I didn't see the movie—but as far as I know, it's nothing like the novel at all, yup. The title is the only thing that they share. So you talked about this a little bit too and you've touched on the teaching and writing. But can you give us a little bit more kind of a back story or your thoughts on the writing process and/or how you think about writing and teaching? And you talked about what you tell your writing students, but if there are other kinds of links or parallels between writing and teaching for you.

MA: Well, I think I'm—I just feel very, very fortunate to get to do both. I have sort of an ongoing debate with my husband. He teaches too and he talks about like, you know, it'd be nice to spend a little less time in the classroom and have more time for your own work. But I do feel like it's, for me, it's tremendously productive. You know, as writers, we spend all our time in small rooms by ourselves staring at the computer. So to me, to have the opportunity to engage with students and hear what they think about writing really sort of keeps my own work going. Right now, it is a challenge that I have to wake up very early to get a little bit of writing done at the beginning of the day, but it's important.

EA: Right. And what about what you're currently working on? Can you give us a little synopsis or preview, a trailer, if you will, on what you're working on right now and what state it's in or whatever you're comfortable sharing with us about what state it's in and, you know, where things are headed or what may be multiple projects you may be working on as a writer and/or as a teacher too as an instructor in the classroom.

MA: Thanks. Yeah. I'm about a third of the way into my second novel. It's called _The Black Room_. And some of you, the younger people in the room probably won't remember this, but in the—mostly the '80s and early '90s there were a bunch of cases across the country where people—this, children were in daycare, the people who run the daycare were accused of abuse but were not guilty as far as, you know, sort of things have played out. It seems like it was sort of a hysterical reaction and some of them went to prison for 10, 15, 20 years and were innocent. And I was really interested and I remember that story. It had been sort of from the back of my mind for years and then sort of came to me—came to the front of my mind. And I was interested just what does this do to a community, you know, when there aren't any bad actors. There are people who are concerned about their children. There are people who are caring for those children with the best of intentions. But because this idea, this perception gets out of control. This community had been totally torn apart. So, that's what I'm working on this. Yeah. My friends from college always say, "Why are your books so dark?" I don't know why that subject matter seems to be coming in, but I'm having a lot of fun working at it. Thank you.

EA: Right.

MA: And I'll be here if any signing books, if anybody wants to have one.

[Applause]
Moderator: [Background Music] This podcast is a 2014 production of the Robert E. Kennedy Library with music by Doug Irion. Visit our blog, kennedylibraryoutloud@lib.calpoly.edu/bog/outloud. There you can find other stories and media from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.

[Music]