Transcript for Episode 111: Interview with Jenny Bhatt

Episode Duration: 50:01

JENN: Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. For new and returning listeners, you may know you can find the podcast on Tumblr at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com or on Twitter @Minoritiesinpub.

And so, we have a collaboration event that has been *months* in the making. And by that, I mean we finally got it scheduled. So I'm very, very, very, very, very, very happy to welcome Jenny Bhatt to the podcast. And I hope that you have been listening to her podcast, The Desi Books Podcast, which is just phenomenal. And I'm curious to talk more to Jenny about that podcasting life because it is real and it is a lot and it is obviously a passion project for you.

But before saying that, let us establish that Jenny Bhatt is an author, a literary translator, and a book critic. And that last year, she had a one-two punch with a debut story collection. It was from 7.13 Books too, right, from our friend Leland Cheuk.

JENNY: Correct, yeah.

JENN: *Each of Us Killers*, it came out in September so you can get it. You should get it. The cover is amazing. 7.13 books is awesome. And Leland is such a great friend of the podcast.

And after that, you have *Ratno Dholi: The Best Stories of Dhumketu* and that is also available for your purchasing pleasure from HarperCollins India.

JENNY: Yes, and it will be out in the US with Deep Vellum Books next year.

JENN: Okay. And that's 2022. Welcome, Jenny!

JENNY: Thank you so much, Jenn. Thank you for having me. And I want to mention, I did listen to your latest one as well with Fauzia Burke. And that was enlightening about marketing and publishing and the promotion of books. I love your podcast. So I'm just thrilled that we're doing this collaboration.

JENN: I am so happy to hear that. And I appreciate that so much. And you are such an advocate and such a candid speaker. For anyone who may follow Jenny on the interwebs, particularly Twitter, you've talked a lot about your journey with a small press and being a woman of color also, and just what all this means. And in creating The Desi Books Podcast that is obviously, like I said, a labor of love. For those of us who do podcasts, we're not necessarily making the big bucks.

JENNY: We're not. No.

JENN: Ahem, as podcasters. Especially doing literary podcasts.

JENNY: Right. Yeah, there's no publisher waiting to kind of give us money for promoting their books. You know, and I read something by Lupita [Aquino] just today talking about writers of, or people of color, promoting books on social media and how we don't get that.

JENN: Yeah, there's this expectation that it is automatic because our love of books is enough. And to an extent, emphasis on 'to an extent,' that is true, because that's why we create these entities. But then there just seems to be this assumption of, "Well, yeah, you'll do it anyway, right?" And 'cause you're about the people, and it's just like, pause. It's like, recognize the capitalism at play here.

JENNY: Exactly. Right. And I don't want to be paid by a publisher because I'd rather have my, you know, independence as far as how I promote a certain writer or talk about their books. But I think I wouldn't want what happened to Lupita recently, which is, she was being dictated terms by the publicist of the book, about when to promote and what to say and how to say it. I would not want to deal with that.

JENN: Yeah, it's real. And it's real annoying, specifically. So yeah.

But can you tell us a little bit about Desi Books Podcast. Like, how did that come about? It's like a FUBU situation: for us, by us. Even doing a podcast is a lot of work. Having talked to Mike Sakasegawa last fall, winter? (Days are weird right now.) He broke down the amount of hours he spent per week on both of his respective podcasts. And it was basically a full-time job.

JENNY: Well, yeah, I mean, he's got two so I'm very much in awe of him.

Well, for me, I actually floated the idea of the podcast on Twitter in 2019. I think it was January 2019. And at that time, I don't think I'd even signed my book contract with Leland or anything. So, I was just looking to find books and writers of South Asian origin. And it was not that easy, unless, you know, you happen to be published by the Big 5 or you're Jhumpa Lahiri or Salman Rushdie.

So I thought, well, maybe there's just not enough platforms. And I thought, well, what if I had a podcast where I showcased or focused on different kinds of books by South Asian writers or writers of South Asian heritage? And what I mean by different kinds of books, I mean ones that don't give you the usual stereotypes and tropes. Because there's a lot of good work out there. It's just not visible. And a lot of other writer friends of mine also said they had to go on the hunt if they wanted to find those kinds of books.

So anyway, I floated it in 2019, in January 2019, and got a lot of responses on Twitter. It was one of those [tweets] that just took off, went viral. And then 2019 got away from me because I was in the process of moving back from India to the U.S.

So then when 2020 came around, and I was in the U.S. finally, and then the pandemic hit, and I had a whole bunch of writer friends of South Asian origin. It was almost like the bottom just fell out. I mean, they all, of the ones who had books out in 2020 during this pandemic, they were like, “Okay, that's it, my book’s done.” Because it's with a small press, whether it's university or whatever. But media venues were saying that they were cutting back on book reviews because freelance budgets were drying up. And that happened to me as a reviewer too when I was pitching. And then book events had all stopped for a while, while bookstores were figuring out how to go virtual with all the book tours and everything.

So there was this period of time in March and April when everybody was like, “What's going to happen?” And how are we going to get the word out about our books? And I was also in that same quandary, right. I mean, I had two books coming out that year, which I had not planned. It's just that I had two books coming out in two different countries, and with two different publishers. And as a debut writer, you don't dictate when you can have your book out. So I was just like, “Oh, my God, it's bad enough having one book out in a pandemic, but I'm going to have two books out in two countries, and I can't even travel to the other country.” And so what can I do?

I thought, well, I could sit here and get all depressed about it and get all complain-y or whatever. Or I could do what I always believed, which is that a rising tide lifts all boats. And so why don't I do something that platform will showcase other writers of South Asian origin? Because it's putting out positive energy then, instead of negative energy, right? I mean, I could go on Twitter and complain about, oh, how woe is me, I've got two books out. And I don't know how to promote them. And how to get the word out there. Or I could say, you know what, forget it, let's just do what we can from where I'm sitting. That's all I could do.

So that's when I thought, okay that idea I had a year ago, maybe now is the time. And that's how it started, actually, in April of last year. So it's about a year now. And like you said, it is a lot of work. I knew a little bit going in what it would take. Because I'd done my research, I knew that it would be X number of hours a week if I wanted to do it right. And that doesn't mean that I got it right from day one. Of course, as you might know, we are, we're all learning process and technical stuff as we go along. So for me, it was a learning process the first few months. I got feedback from listeners. But it was also gratifying when publicists then started to reach out because then that tells me that people are listening. And if a publicist from a decent sized publisher feels like, okay, they want their author on the podcast, that tells you something, right. So yeah, I mean, that's how it all began.

I will say this, that it's been one of the most rewarding things personally because I've been able to connect with and have conversations with writers that I wouldn't have done otherwise. And they're from all over the world, South Asian writers, because, you know, I've talked to people

from Canada, from Pakistan, from Australia. And so, it's been rewarding for me personally. Yes, it's very time consuming, but I feel like, “Okay, I'm doing something positive amidst all that stuff that's going on, right.”

JENN: And to me that's the emphasis of what community is, is we're doing stuff to bring us together, to bring more visibility to what's important to us. And it's not to say that time and energy shouldn't be respected, but it's how you're choosing to use it. No one's dictating that, like you said, with the Lupita [Aquino] situation.

JENNY: Mmm hmm.

JENN: It's just, this is who I am, and this is what I do. And also you have a very impressive outline, and you have the segments. You got a Bookshop link. I'm just like, wow, these are things I should be doing.

JENNY: Yeah, but a part of that is the technology just suddenly happened about the same time as my podcasting, right. Like Bookshop.org just started before the pandemic or something like that. They had this feature of allowing you to create bookshops there. So yeah, I mean, I think some of it was timing.

JENN: Yeah, yeah, for sure. I mean, it's not to say we all have time now ‘cause that's not realistic to say either, even though quarantine is still going on. But it is an interesting way to kind of, like, divert your energies and like, where does that energy go to, if you do even have the energy to do stuff because admittedly people don’t.

JENNY: Oh, yeah. And there are days. Yeah, there are days, Jenn, as I'm sure you have. There are days where I don't have that energy. I started this podcast as a weekly thing, and now I’ve gone to biweekly because it's work and if I want to do it well enough, do justice to the writers, I can't do it weekly. It would be a full-time job, weekly.

[10:08]

JENN: Yep, that's why we're monthly now.

JENNY: Yes, super tired.

JENN: Because biweekly was like boom boom boom for three years, but it’s like, I can't do this.

JENNY: Right, I mean, you have a full-time job. I gave up my full-time job. So, I do have some time. But, you know, I also try to make money doing other writing. And that tends to sometimes take a backseat then, which I can't afford.

JENN: Yeah, it's a lot. And for me, too, like I know for you, your emphasis is on the authors. And something that I've stepped back from a bit with the podcast is authors. That's mainly because of the time consumption of reading.

And also, the thing that happens for us, right, is you may not love everything you're approached about. And that's the hardship of promotion is finding the people who will love the book, but also trying to connect with people who've never heard of it, in hopes they'll really enjoy a book.

And then there's the assumption that just because, like, for me, it's Minorities in Publishing, I become a one-stop shop for a lot of people because they're like, "Oh, well, you talk to people who are marginalized." Though that does not stop the publicist from sending me cis, abled, white men.

JENNY: Oh, yeah, I get those too.

JENN: I'm just saying how? *How?* How, Jenny? Our names… The names of our podcasts alone should filter this crap out. And yet…

JENNY: Yes.

JENN: I admire that even more that you're very dedicated to be able to continually talk to authors, because I don't *not* want to talk to authors. You are an author. And I've interviewed several this year already. It's just like, I don't even know if I can get to your book. I don't even know if I can get to your book by the time it comes out. I don't even know if I can get to your book within three months of it coming out. Do you mind being on the podcast next year?

JENNY: No, I totally hear you, Jenn. Because I mean, yeah, it's tough to get to all the books. And that's one of the reasons that I have different segments. Desi Books, what I do is, there are interviews, but then I also have a Desi Reads segment where I feel like, okay, this is a good book, this is an important book. I'm not gonna get to read it in time, I will eventually, but I won't get to read it in time. So I have the writer pre-record a reading from the book. And then I'll play that with an intro and everything. I also have a segment where it's called Five Desi Faves, where I have them talk about five books by other writers of South Asian origin that they like and enjoy.

And so I try to do that because my goal is to platform them in some way or the other, right. And that doesn't always have to be an interview. There's another way I can showcase them, their work. So, I try to mix it up a little bit. I used to do book giveaways for a while, but that got too much in terms of logistics management.

JENN: Brilliant. Like, honestly, that makes so much sense. Because you're not doing it in one way. And it makes it more functional. And I'm just like, why didn't most of us think of that?

JENNY: Yeah. You know, it was the only way. When I sat down to think, "Okay, I'm going to do this podcast." I told myself, the only way I was going to manage it, if I had these different

segments. Otherwise, I couldn't, I would not have been able to do weekly interviews. Because yeah, there's no way.

JENN: So who are you reading? Or have you read? Doesn't have to be super recent if it doesn't come to mind. Or maybe it can be, to like, again, give platform. But are there any authors that you're pretty hyped about?

JENNY: Well, I just recently read and reviewed and interviewed Priyanka Champaneri. Her novel, *The City of Good Death*, it won the 2018 Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing. And I remember reading an excerpt at the time and thinking, oh, this sounds interesting. It's set in India, and the interesting thing is Priyanka herself has only been to India on brief visits. And I'm always a little bit leery of writers who write about India, but they've not been there. And as a whole-- we can have this conversation at some point. But there's a whole thing about why. She did a lot of research, first of all. She did a lot. And so I thought that was interesting. And I have reviewed it and hopefully the review will come out soon in the Star Tribune.

And then I have two or three other books on my, galleys I should say, on my desk. One is coming out in August: Rafia Zakaria, who is a writer, book critic, essayist, and it's called *Against White Feminism*. I'm kind of excited about that one because I've read her essays online in the past at *The Nation* and other places, and she's very, very sharp and very precise and very good with her nonfiction. So I'm looking forward to that. And then I have *Curb,* which is kind of this hybrid prose and poetry book by Divya Victor. And she's a professor, I apologize, I forget where she teaches, but anyway, I have her book as well.

And then there's a poetry collection called *Pilgrim Bell* by Kaveh Akbar, who's a very well-known poet and professor. Those are three that are sitting on my desk as we speak.

JENN: Oh yeah, Kaveh. I met him at Tin House a couple years ago. Such a beautiful soul. Great aura. Wonderful, wonderful person.

JENNY: I've never met him. But you know, obviously I've read his work. Yeah.

JENN: Are you open to talking about your experience last year 'cause I mean, was it last year? Yes. Yeah. Okay. It was. Holy crap, Jenny. I was like, your book came out two years ago. And I literally said at the top of the podcast it came out several months ago. I talked to Anjali Enjeti last week about having two books come out within a month of each other during a quarantine. And you also had two books come within a month of each other during a quarantine last year. They are two very different books, the leadup to being a debut in a hellish year that, you know, no one could have ever predicted. At least us, you know. The people who had the power could have predicted it, but not us, not us laypeople.

Like how was that for you? Because you did again, for those who follow you on Twitter, you were pretty candid about certain experiences, especially being an indie author.

JENNY: So my book came out, the short story collection, *Each of Us Killers*, came out in September. Obviously, we knew that date in March, April last year when the pandemic hit and we began to realize that book launches in 2021 were not going to be your traditional book launches, right? And so we already knew that. But none of us had any idea what was going to happen, we were just gonna just go along with and try to figure it out, right? We were in that first wave of writers who were trying to figure out how this new way of launching books or virtual scenario was going to be.

And then my second book was coming out in India, and my initial plan had been to go to India to do that book launch. And that obviously wasn't going to happen now. And I've interviewed Anjali too, actually. So both her books are at least, even though they are, like me, they're two different books, because one is an essay collection, one's a novel. But they're both coming out in the U.S. And so, in her case, and I think she's had time to see what's happened in 2020 with pandemic books. She's had a bit of time to work with her publicist and figure out "Okay, how are we going to navigate this," right? Not to say that makes it any easier, necessarily. But of course, she's had a little bit of time to see how it's played out for other writers. You know, in my case, or in, you know, the case of a few other writers who are my cohorts, if you like, debut cohorts, like Sejal Shah and a bunch of others. We were just figuring it out.

So to answer your question about how did it go, I'll tell you what I did. I realized that I wasn't, or very soon, very quickly, I realized that I wasn't going to get the book events or the book tour that I thought I was going to do. I had planned for four cities, because I have family in those four cities. And I could have stayed with them and saved on hotel bills. And now that wasn't going to happen. And as far as virtual bookstore events, those were going to be very hard to get because even the bookstores were trying to figure things out. So what I thought—the only thing I could do is, that was within my power, was to write essays and that sort of thing, right? I could get excerpts of the story collection out there. And I could write essays and do reading lists.

And so, part of my book promotion plan was just to put my head down and just write because that's what I can do. I know that's in my control: to write. So I pitched a bunch of things to different places. And thankfully, they accepted. And that's what I did. And then slowly, of course, people began to reach out once the book was out there and say, "Oh, I'd like to interview you" or somebody wanted a galley copy for a book review. So yeah, those things happened. Slowly, without much of a plan.

As I said, very candidly on Twitter, publishing with an indie publisher, I did hire my own publicist, an independent publicist, to help me. Because this is a first book and I don't come from the publishing world or even from the MFA world. I don't have a literary network. I don't know all the people I should know. And so I did pay money and hire a publicist. And a lot of people I know do that. So that was something I knew I had to budget for.

Yeah, we tried to do the best that we could in terms of hitting galley copies out there and pitching essays and interviews. But it was tough. It was not easy by any means. And it's tougher, I think, as you probably know, for short story collections, right? I remember even when I was

pitching this collection, with agents, and other publishers, a lot of them said to me, “Oh, I like your writing, but you know, I'd like the first book you go out with to be a novel. And so if you have a novel send that to me.” And so, already out the gate, even before a pandemic, I knew it was going to be tough because this is a debut short story collection.

[19:50]

JENNY: Let me just end on the positive note with this answer. And that is: I'm very grateful for the fact that I got to work with a terrific publisher with 7.13 Books. I had Leland, he had my back. I had the editor who works with Leland, Hasanthika Sirisena, she’s amazing. She was my editor for the book. The book got picked up and reviewed favorably by Publishers Weekly and Kirkus and Shelf Awareness. So you know, the trades, as you know, the trades picked up the book. And that was great. So I'm very grateful. I think I've had the best possible book launch that I could have had given the circumstances.

JENN: It's interesting because there's just so much to it. Especially looking at big publishers, indie publishers, the shrinking pool of trades, and how it takes time for places to become kind of legitimized, right? So even when we, in our communities, create new things for our communities, because we're like, there's just not enough of *this*. There's kind of this period where you do have to become legitimized, right? Of like, oh, well, your podcast has been around for a year. All right, cool, cool, cool. Okay, oh, your publication has been around for a year. Oh, your publication has had these types of people. Or your press has done this, okay. And for us who are building new things that that time that goes into it, into wanting to be visible, it's still kind of feeding into this idea of this is what we need in terms of availability for the community. But also, it still needs to meet the kind of, quote-unquote, merit that's been established by whoever you want to say it is.

JENNY: Yeah.

JENN: You know what I mean? I’m like capitalism, but obviously it's not just capitalism, right?

JENNY: No, but you know, you make a really good point. I want to pick up on that, which is, you know, when you talk about community. I have a marketing background, right? I had a corporate career before I went into writing full time. And so, one of the things you always think about is, who is the intended readership audience, right, for this book, this product. Because in the capitalist world, it is a product. When you're writing it, it's not. But once it's packaged and you're planning to sell it, it's a product.

And I remember having this conversation with my publicist, who, very good person, hardworking, and has achieved great results for other people, which is why I wanted to work with them. But my book has a very particular readership. That's not to say that non-South Asian people don't read books like mine. But my books sort of didn't adhere to the usual tropes that might be associated with books that are, you know, a book that's been set in India. And so in that sense, there was a very particular readership.

I wrote the entire book while I was living in India for six years. Even though I wasn't thinking of a reader at the time I was writing each individual story. But my stories are written for a person who's familiar to some extent with India and South Asia and even South Asian immigrants in the U.S., and the issues and challenges they deal with.

So, I had to find my readership, I'll be honest. I had to seek out venues, you know, that are read or frequented by South Asian folks, people of South Asian origin in the U.S. That was a whole new process for me, personally, because sometimes I wasn't even aware of some of these.

So I do think there's a whole thing here about, when we talk about writers of color, minority writers, and publicists who may be not familiar with the minority readership that the book is for. I mean, it's about finding your readers. And that part of the journey was hard for me to find the right media venues. Because the traditional media venues, any book by an indie publisher, there's a whole lot of places that won't even touch an indie publisher book, right? I mean, that's just not what they do. They look at the Big 5. So you already know you're not going to get into some of the big name places. So you are trying to find other literary venues where you can potentially have folks who might be interested in your kind of book. Though yeah, I think when you're dealing with an industry that's mostly still white, including the publicists and the publicity machinery, it's not easy for a minority writer, right? And you know that.

JENN: So there's always been this issue for us finding our communities and being on the acquisitions end now, of, and I was talking to an agent, an agent of color, earlier today. And she said, she's like, I hear people don't want these pain narratives. And she was like, but how do we not talk about the issues that we face as people of color in our writing? And she's like, I would side eye someone if they didn't, unless it was a very particular type of story.

And I said, well, just to like convey to you, like you're saying, Jenny, is these quote-unquote, conventional narratives that become comfortable within the white space and that always prioritize the white gaze because it's always looking at the comparative nature of our existence to white expectation, to colonial expectation, to Western expectation. And I said, that's the issue, when the whole book is packaged as that. Thus, the pain is not coming from a more natural or organic form of storytelling or motivation to move the story forward. It is coming from the same place that we have been reared, at least I have been here in New York City, to understand our existence to be. And I said, that's what I think people aren't articulating. But that's what they're saying.

And I was like, that's what I mean, when I say trauma narrative. I'm like, I don't want to be mired in a trauma narrative. And I was like, straight up, I don't want slave books. And I got lectured by a Black author about that, you know. She's self-published. And I'm like, cool, cool. And I said, maybe it is kind of glib to just call it a slave narrative. But I'm gonna tell you right now, I don't want to read about slaves. I just don't. I hate to say that. I have a right to say, I don't want to read about slaves right now.

JENNY: Right. And I hear you and you know what, how you feel about slave narratives? That's how I feel about slum sagas. I call them slum sagas. And that is a typical slum story from India which checks off certain boxes for Western publishers. And it glosses over a lot of the complexities and layers related to socioeconomic and cultural aspects, related to the judicial and law enforcement systems that exist in the country. Because there is a certain discourse on India that that kind of book panders to, and it's unfortunate.

And I will tell you last year, there was this one big book, well, two or three big books like that, from writers of South Asian origin. I was asked to review two of them. And I said, no, because I said those books were not written for me. They were written for a whole different readership. And they're slum sagas and they totally misrepresent.

I have an essay in the works on this whole topic, not singling out the books in particular, but just talking about this as a general phenomenon. Where even the big reviewers and critics at the biggest venues gushed over the book, without stopping to think that, wait a minute, this kind of dystopia, and I call it a dystopia because it doesn't exist in real India, this would never happen. I can't even begin to tell you how much it distressed me because it tells me something about the ethics of this writer. But it also tells me about how much critics of these big establishments, how much they just want their prejudices and biases about India to be confirmed. It's this confirmation bias again and again and again, that these books are pandering to. I hear you on the slave narrative. I feel the same way about slum sagas.

JENN: And the directive that one may or may not be receiving because if you're getting reinforcement—that this is good, that this is going to be a bestseller, that this is marketable—I see why people within the communities may kind of lean towards that kind of narrative. And if you're being reinforced by people who are ignorant of the more thoughtful approaches, or the minutiae that we really should be looking into, that really feeds into the whole way the system works in various communities, because there's no one way. Like I see that. I see why this keeps happening. And it frustrates me on many levels. And as I'm sure [you know] and I know it does, because you've spoken about it very vocally. And it's just kind of like capitalism continues to allow you to kind of ignore moral responsibility. Because then we have the *American Dirts* of the world, right?

JENNY: Well, exactly. That's a prime example. *American Dirt* is a prime example of the kind of thing I'm talking about. That's the immigrant, the refugee narrative, right? And the crime situation and everything, you know, the border situation. It takes all the usual expected tropes and panders to all of those biases we have about what's happening with border security and what's happening with crime in Mexico and all of that. And that's a book that totally pandered. And it came out to this huge fanfare with this huge hype machine, PR hype machine, behind it, as you know. And as late as Thanksgiving last year, I still saw the book being sold at my local Costco.

So no matter what Dignidad Literaria, all the activism that happened when, you know you remember how they all went to the offices of Flatiron, that whole group of folks went there and

said you know, Myriam Gurba and a whole bunch of folks remember. And Flatiron said, apologized and they did the public apology and they said sorry and all that. The author canceled her book tour, I believe, but still, you know, the book was selling. There are book clubs all over the country saying, oh, yes, we're loving this book and we're reading it. Oprah. *Oprah* wanted it on her book club, right?

[30:03]

I mean, well, how do you deal with that? Like, what do you do? What can you do when you have a whole capitalist machine that, once it's set in motion, no matter how much some lone voice may try to speak out and say, wait a minute guys, you can't stop that juggernaut. You just can't.

JENN: And this is also when I just side-eyeing a lot of things. Because last year, insert whatever words you want to say about last year, working in an industry, basically publishing is my career. So, you know, and I'm at peace with that. I don't hate publishing. But I've told people, I said, "I'm in this career and, and I have to be critical of it. And I have to recognize I'm part of it. And I'm part of the problem."

So I think something that I was reading, rereading actually, and talking about in reading group is, Lacy Johnson said in her book, *The Reckonings*, one of the essays, she's like, there's a truth that people really don't want to acknowledge is that none of us are as good as we think we are. Or wish we are, or something along those lines. I said, "It'd be great if we kind of came to that collective understanding that we are *all* flawed." We are *all*, all perpetuating certain things. And even in pushing for it to be better, I never want to forget the responsibility I have, but also the fact that I am within it. You know what I mean?

In that regard, I think there's just so much to all the levels of publishing that are problematic. And reading about certain things that have happened, the Big 5, which may be the big four, which may be the big two, who frickin' knows. You know, like, yeah, this is the perpetuation of the biggest thing because they dominate most of the market. And then also looking at certain presses that are still capitalizing off of us but have no BIPOC staff. And this is like at the indie level, or the mid-tier level. And then seeing how hard Leland and Hasie work at 7.13, to know that they're like, we just want to create good stuff, and we want to make it da da da da. And I know how hard they work. And I know you know how hard they work having been published by them. The disparity is great. And I feel like it's everywhere.

And I'm just curious about your thoughts in terms of like, helping and really being active in helping those BIPOC spaces again, the FUBU—for us by us spaces. Because it's important, it's just so important to have 7.13 thrive to have… There's just so many spaces, you know, it's just dizzying because I'm just like, there's so many spaces I love. And I know that BIPOC, disabled LGBTQ people work in a lot of, like, big corporate spaces that I work in. And at the same time, we're gonna be fine. You know, maybe not. Someone might fire me at any day, 'cause they're like, "No, Black people aren't en vogue anymore, we're just tired of your bullshit." So I was like,

okay, in the meantime… Like, I really want to make it a point, we're supporting the Hyphen Magazines, you know, we're supporting the 7.13s. We're supporting the, you know, Lambda Lits, and all these spaces, that are actively doing this for us, and not just profiting off of us.

JENNY: Right. Right. Exactly. And I think yeah, to your point, when I look at the disparity that you've mentioned that exists within publishing for BIPOC. Like you, I don't work in publishing, but I'm very grateful that publishing exists because we get all these amazing life-changing books, right. And some of them do come from the Big 5 or Big 4, whatever, right? So I'm not sitting here saying they're all completely evil. I mean, some very good books that I, that have changed my life, have come from those places. But to your point, there are blinkers, there are blind spots, there are biases. And oftentimes, they're looking for that runaway bestseller, right? They're looking for that debut novel that's going to pay most of their bills that year, which is capitalism.

So to your point, yeah, I think the smaller organizations, independent organizations, like the ones you mentioned, Hyphen, Lambda, and all these places that are doing the hard work, often unpaid. I try to support them in ways as well, like you said. You know, what we do is we maybe spotlight what they're publishing, what they're doing, the work that they're doing.

Like last year, I tried to collaborate with a couple of places. One major collaboration that I did last year with a smaller organization. It's run out of Europe, and it's called Global Literature and Libraries Initiative, and their focus is they try to look at literature from around the world, especially from the BIPOC writers and venues and they spotlight that. And they asked me to be a guest editor for the month of December. And I took that whole month to spotlight translations. Because I feel like literary translations from South Asia don't get noticed. Whenever you see reading lists about translated books, there's often not a lot of South Asian literature on there. And so I ended up doing that. And then despite that, I saw this, you know, a decent sized venue where they publish their notable 2021 books in translation, and there wasn't a single South Asian book on it. So I tweeted about it. And they were very nice and gracious and said, “We're sorry. And would you mind doing a list for our spring issue?” I said, I would love to. They were very good about it. And it just came out today. So we try to do what we can in the small ways that we can. And I'm very grateful that they did the right thing, that instead of ignoring my Tweet, they said, you know what? Yeah, we slipped up. We should have had some South Asian books on there. Would you mind helping us out?

So yeah, I think we can all just do a little bit from where we sit. We don't have to be working in publishing. We don't even have to necessarily be writers. I think all of us who care about good literature, who care about BIPOC literature, we can all do a little bit from where we sit, right?

JENN: Absolutely. Absolutely. And it's constant, constant accountability.

JENNY: Mmm hmmm.

JENN: Which, depending on the day, you may or may not see.

JENNY: Well, yeah, that, that's. Yeah.

JENN: Who the hell knows?

JENNY: But yeah, I mean, but to your point, there's a lot of issues within the publishing industry. And, but how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. So each of us like, like you're doing with this podcast, like I'm doing with my podcast, each of us, we do a little bit. And then as, as I've said, you know, I firmly believe this: a rising tide lifts all boats. So I'm not here just you know, touting my thing or my books because I believe that that alone isn't going to change the tide. But if I bring everyone else along with me, if I lift others, we have this tide, and then that's helping everybody, right?

JENN: That, that is the goal. So, yes. Well, we'll get there. Like you said, one episode and podcast at a time.

JENNY: Yeah, right, exactly. It's— That's all we can do. Yeah, that's all we can do.

JENN: Oh this has been an absolute pleasure talking to you, Jenny.

JENNY: Thank you. You know, I've enjoyed this conversation. I wish, I mean, if we were traveling and stuff, I would have come to New York City for my book tour. And I would have met you and Leland and everybody else in New York, because there's a lot of writer friends there. But maybe someday we'll meet in-person.

JENN: I do hope maybe even by 2022.

JENNY: Yeah.

JENN: When *Ratno Dholi* is out, like for us in the States. Maybe by then we will be vaccinated, and hopefully being smart about it in the States, at least. Because you've seen the news.

JENNY: Yes. Unfortunately, yeah, I know.

JENN: Yeah, we want to do, like, book events. Again, it's not to be selfish and be all like, buy books. It really is to be like, I just missed the literary community so much.

JENNY: Right. Exactly, exactly. But you know, I will say I am in one way, in some ways, I'm sort of glad for the virtual world now. Because there are events that I would not have been able to participate in, literary events, if it wasn't for the fact that it was virtual. Because, you know, I don't have unlimited finances to travel all around the country. So in some ways, I think folks in the literary community have figured out how to make this virtual thing work. And I know we all get Zoomed out after a while, but to some extent, I think it's been a good thing for folks who

can't travel, can't afford to take time off work and travel to places to attend events and festivals. So I mean, I'm grateful to be able to do that.

JENN: And I heartily encourage people to buy both your books. I mean, again, I know *The Best Stories* is not coming out for us in the States until 2022. And I guess if you must, Amazon. And I'm not against Amazon in support of authors, I just don't like Amazon. But I— Thank you, for the sake of authors, buy these books. But *Each of Us Killers* you can get from your indie bookstores.

JENNY: Yes, it is available. And, and I would ask, you know, I'm a big fan of libraries. It's not about the money, but it's about having books available for those who can't afford to buy them. So I would request folks to just ask their local libraries to stock the books, you know, that they like and I think it helps other readers who can't afford to buy books. And, yeah.

[39:59]

JENN: And so how can people reach you again? Buy your books? Definitely check out The Desi Books Podcast, because that is a must.

JENNY: The best way to go find me is, go to my website, which is just Jenny Bhatt writer, as one word, JennyBhattWriter.com. The podcast is at desibooks.co. And then, as you mentioned earlier, although I am on all three major platforms and social media, I spend most of my time on Twitter. I am on Instagram and Facebook, but I just go there because I have to. I just find it, Twitter, it's easier for me, it's quicker. And I don't have to spend all day on it. So if people want to connect, and have conversations, Twitter is probably the easiest place to find me.

JENN: Got it. So your website is JENNYBHATTWRITER.COM

JENNY: Correct. Yes. Because Jenny Bhatt was taken. There's actually an artist in Bombay with the same name. And so JennyBhatt.com was taken, so I had to go with JennyBhattWriter.com

JENN: Same for me with Jennifer Baker. There's, I mean, it's not a Bombay artist, but there is, I believe she was, I think she was a photographer or something. It was something different. But she's in England, so there is a Jennifer Baker in England. And so I had to be Jennifer N Baker. Yeah, I couldn't be just Jennifer Baker. And then at one point someone emailed me and said, the URL Jenn Baker's open if you want to pay like a couple hundred dollars. And I was like, pfft no.

JENNY: No. Yeah.

JENN: Really not. A couple of hundred? No. That's ridiculous. I branded myself well enough, I think.

JENNY: Yeah, yeah.

JENN: To spend that money for two URLs. And maybe that Jerry Bhatt might just— Her GoDaddy account might just expire, you can just slip right in there.

JENNY: I don't know. She's actually pretty famous. She was more famous than me.

JENN: Oh.

JENNY: Yeah. I mean, she's pretty big in art circles, well globally, actually. So I think she's gonna hang on to that for a while.

JENN: All right, all right. Not wishing any ill will on the other Jenny Bhatt, but you know, if the URL makes itself available, then why not? Get some of that following. And you can just direct them to *Each Of Us Killers*.

JENNY: Right, yeah. Yeah, there are you go.

JENN: Be like, Hey, I'm a fan of stories. I get down with this. It's just like, boom, sale.

JENNY: Yeah.

JENN: So it's so great to talk to you Jenny. We've been on the Twitter a lot, but it's really nice to hear your voice and hear your thoughts in live time and not like, just on a screen.

JENNY: Yes, me too. Thank you. Yeah, I mean, Twitter is good in some ways. But yeah, we can, with the character limit and everything, there's only so much we can do. And so this was great. I really appreciate you having me on this podcast. And I appreciate all that you're doing for BIPOC writers as well. There's a lot that I learned just from watching you. I love your Twitter threads. You do these threads on publishing, from time to time, I just love those. So thank you.

JENN: Oh, thank you. Mutual Appreciation Society once again.

JENNY: Yeah.

JENN: Success. It really is. Every episode is just like, I appreciate you. And it's like, I appreciate you back. And I'm just like, awww, it makes me feel all good during a pandemic.

JENNY: Mmm hmm. Yeah, spread some of that positive energy around, right? poi

JENN: Yeah. And I'll get to your collection at some point. It's in my apartment.

JENNY: Oh, cool, okay.

JENN: Oh, yeah, I buy books all the time. Have I had the chance to read them? Not so much.

JENNY: Well, you have to read books for a living. So I mean, I get it. You know, your job is to be constantly reading books. So there's only so much you can read. Yeah.

JENN: Yeah, but I really want to get to that joy reading, you know what I mean? Where it's just like, I think that's something I do miss and don't miss about Electric Literature is, sometimes I got these books, and I was just like, "Oh my God, I'm so glad I found out about this book." And then sometimes it's like, this is a bit of a chore.

That's the thing, you're just like, I just want to read books by people and not have to write anything in conjunction about it, not have to worry about buying it, not have to worry about how to sell it. I just want to sit and read a book.

JENNY: There's another writer, Ilana Masad, you might know her.

JENN: Oh, yeah.

JENNY: Yeah. She had a podcast too. And she said exactly the same thing to me when I was talking to her, which is, she wanted to get to a point where she was reading just for herself and not because she had to read it for the podcast or for a book review.

JENN: Yeah, she does a lot of reviews too. She's serious about it and so I'm just like… I just cannot.

JENNY: Is there a conflict of interest thing that you can't do book reviews of some kinds of books or something?

JENN: I probably could as long as they weren't mine.

JENNY: Oh, okay. Sure.

JENN: Or my imprint. So I think it might be fine. But it does get complicated. And that's a whole other podcast. I feel like having an episode where you just talk to people who review books. Like I could put you and Anjali on and like maybe even Ilana and just like, talk about just like, so what happens when you just don't like it?

JENNY: Yeah, you know, so you mentioned, and actually Anjali, Ilana, Hope Wabuke—

JENN: Oh yeah, Hope! Yeah.

JENNY: —We were all, yeah, we were on an AWP panel talking about conflicts of interest in literary criticism.

JENN: Oh snap, you were?

JENNY: Yeah. And Kamil Ahsan was on that as well. So all of us were talking about just what you said. One of the main topics was, yeah, what happens if you don't like a book, but then if you don't review it, then it probably won't get reviewed, because it's from a BIPOC writer who isn't going to get that many reviews to begin with. And so yeah, there's the whole problem with, on the one hand, you feel like you want to represent, you want to make sure you get more BIPOC writers' books reviewed. But on the other hand, what happens if you just can't connect with it?

JENN: Yeah, yeah. And that happens a lot, too. I spoke to a couple writers, BIPOC writers, who are writing for *The Times*. And one writer, who was a young debut, too, they were particularly worried about it coming back to them, which I thought was weird because I've just like, I feel like your two audiences are not the same, so… But they were just like, I didn't really like this book. And now I have to frame it in a way where I'm complimentary, but critical. And they were having a hard time with that. And then they're like, but I want my book reviewed in *The Times*. So I don't want to be harsh on this person in case, like, someone might review me badly. It was interesting, because in the end, again, there wasn't cross pollination. Like the person who did end up reviewing that person's book wouldn't have been the same person who wanted to read the book that they were reviewing. But it was a person of color, and they were just like worried because the person they were reviewing was white. And I think that also adds to that, right?

JENNY: Yes.

JENN: When you are a person of color and you're critiquing *whiteness*, let alone a white person's art, are you constantly worried about: are you gonna get just shanked in a way, you know? Not literally shanked but kind of like, you know, like in the literary sense, shanked.

JENNY: Right. Mmm hmm.

JENN: You can't hang with us anymore. You were cool, but then you dissed the white woman's book.

JENNY: Yeah.

JENN: And I say you can't worry about this. Then what is your focus? Like, who are you prioritizing? If everything you're going to do is because you want to be liked, you want to be a likeable person of color, then I don't know what to tell you.

JENNY: I think I'm past that. I'm at an age, Jenn, where I say this often, I'm at an age where I have no more fucks left to give. So I don't worry about being liked. That said, I can't read a book that I don't like, so I don't end up reviewing books that I don't like.

JENN: Valid. Yeah, I'm with you. I've been with you since like, the age 37. I'm 40, I turned 40 two months ago. But it's just kind of like, yeah, wait till I get 55 'cause I won't care about nothing. I'm just, give it a decade, I'm not gonna care about a damn thing.

JENNY: Yeah, I think it helps is, I think for me, it helps that I don't depend on my writing as my primary source of income, right? So I have other things I do to make money, to earn a living. And so then, then, I feel like I can do certain things within the publishing industry that yeah, like you said, I'm not too worried about being liked in that way. So. But mostly.

JENN: I hear you. I hear you. Now that I'm in a front-facing position, it is very different than being someone who was doing production, which is an important position but is not in the front and you're not the one launching the books. You're literally working on them, but you're not selling them. You're not palling around with people in order for them to sell books for you or sell books to you. And so ohhhh, now I gotta be *likeable*.

JENNY: Yeah, you have to be tactful, or you have to—

JENN: *Yes.*

JENNY: Because, because people are watching you more carefully. People are listening to you and that, because yeah, you're more visible now.

JENN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. But I'm like, I'm still gonna call out white supremacy so.

JENNY: Yes.

JENN: You don't want to sell me a book on said white supremacy. I won't work with you. I don't care how pretty your prose is, we need to acknowledge some white supremacy.

JENNY: Right, right.

JENN: So thank you again, Jenny Bhatt, for being on. And again, y'all should absolutely follow The Desi Books Podcast. And you also have it on Instagram, so that is even more handy for you to just kind of keep up with what Jenny's doing, as well as her Twitter and JennyBhattWriter.com.

Thank you so much again, Jenny.

JENNY: Thank you, Jenn. Appreciate it.

JENN: And thank you all for listening. Once again, you can find the podcast on minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, on twitter @Minoritiesinpub and wherever you'd listen to podcasts, including Apple Music, Google Play, Spotify, TuneIn and iHeartRadio.

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