

Transcript for Episode 110: Interview with Anjali Enjeti

Episode Duration: 101:12

JENN: Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. For new and returning listeners, you may know that you can find the podcast on Tumblr at [Minoritiesinpublishing.Tumblr.com](https://minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com) or on Twitter @Minoritiesinpub and wherever you may listen to podcasts.

And so happy spring everyone. I hope you're doing well, keeping safe, enjoying a bit more better weather.

And I am so glad, and I know I say this repeatedly, but it is because I love every guest dearly. But I especially love this month's guest, Anjali Enjeti, who I have had the pleasure to know for several years now. And the fact that we can celebrate her so grandly this year is just, it's very heartwarming.

So Anjali is the author of *Southbound*, a book of essays coming out on April 15 of this year. And so by the time this episode airs, you can get *Southbound* and I encourage you to do so. But she's gonna be a dynamic duo this year with *The Parted Earth*, a novel that is coming out May 4, welcome on. Welcome, Anjali!

ANJALI: Thank you so much. What a touching introduction. Gosh, I'm so glad that I've had the pleasure and the privilege to know you for so long, Jenn. You're a friend, but I feel like unintentionally, you've been a mentor and a role model and so many things to me and so many things to other authors, so. And I love this podcast. So it's such a thrill and an honor for me to be here.

JENN: Oh, more mutual appreciation society here 'cause you've earned so much. And I don't know how familiar people who are listening may be or will become with Anjali's work, but she is just—I don't think there's one word that encapsulates you. And there shouldn't be, because that seems very limiting in and of itself, honestly.

ANJALI: And weird? Maybe weird.

JENN: But no, but you're so dedicated, and you're so focused, and you're so driven, and you're so generous, you know what I mean? Like, you're generous in the work that you do, not just in the writing world, but in the activism world, but in your personal life, and just who you are. I'm

not always my best self at all times. And that's just us being flawed people. But you know, you're the type of person who always reminds me of like, this is what your best can be.

ANJALI: Awww.

JENN: This is who you kind of want to emulate. Is someone who is this generous and this honest, and all of these things. And so that's why I feel like we're all so excited that you have two books out. Even though I know this might be incredibly stressful on top of everything else, to have two books coming out within a month of each other.

ANJALI: Yeah.

JENN: But it also means we get to spend more money on your work. So that's a bonus.

ANJALI: It is and oh thank you, Jenn. I mean, I want to say here that if I am in fact generous, it's because I have been receiving it in spades from many writers, particularly writers of color over the years, including yourself. I mean, right? I tried to emulate the people I see who get it right most of the times, right? We're not perfect. We don't get it right all of the time. But I do have people I look to who engage in the kind of behavior that I want to also engage in. And it's because I have so many people that exemplify what it means to be honest and open and what it means to lift other people up, which is something that you do all the time. I mean, I think I learned this behavior because I've been the recipient of this kind of generosity. And I, hopefully, I am also paying it forward.

JENN: Oh, you pay it forward in spades for sure. We're gonna let people know how to contact you and how to reach you and all that stuff at the end of the episode, because that's just protocol. But for those who are familiar with your work, especially in the nonfiction space, you do a lot of book reviews, you've done a lot of articles, journalism, investigative journalism, essays, and all these things. And now you're coming into, not just short form, or long form in print, and digital spaces, kind of like those one-offs. Now you're coming into the book world where you're like compiling these huge—well, not huge, because they're actually very short. *The Parted Earth*, which I do have, and I will be getting, because I pre-ordered *Southbound*, yay.

ANJALI: Thank you.

JENN: *The Parted Earth* reads very fast. And it's less than 300 pages. But you know, it is a different animal. When you're writing this kind of, very targeted—like I'm writing an essay on this, I'm writing an essay on that. And *Southbound* is a collection of essays, but you still have to think of it as a full book. I think people think, oh, collections are just kind of a hodgepodge. And I'm like, yes, no. You do have to talk about it. You do have to market it and all that kind of stuff we don't want you to think about as you're writing. Going from that to the book world, what was that like for you? Because *Southbound*, I don't know, does *Southbound* come before *The Parted Earth* and is *Southbound* kind of like an accumulation of stuff that you've been writing over the years?

ANJALI: So, it's interesting because, aside from things like copyediting or page proofing, the books were written actually at completely different times. *The Parted Earth* was my thesis at Queen's University, that's where I did my MFA. And not even the whole book was done. Then I started writing *The Parted Earth* in, I believe the fall or the winter of 2011. Then I started in an MFA program in 2013, and graduated in January of 2015, where the thesis was two-thirds of the book. And then I finished writing it in 2015.

Southbound was sort of, it has a very different genesis. I had been writing essays, as you know, for a while and was thinking of an essay collection and had a vague idea of one. And then I met the then-editor of University of Georgia Press, Walter Biggins, at an anti-gun rally in Atlanta about six or so months before Trump was elected in 2016. So I met him, we talked, we all went to lunch afterwards. And then the following year, I sent him an email and sort of gave him a vague idea of something that I was interested in writing, and would it fit with the press? And he said, "Yeah, let's keep at it." Why don't you send me a short little write-up of it? And so we proceeded from there. So, by then, you know, by the time I initially pitched Walter, I had been seeking an agent for almost a year already for *The Parted Earth*, so I wasn't writing them the same.

But what was interesting about *Southbound* is, from the time I submitted the proposal and got a book contract to the book it is now, it actually changed quite a bit. The book before was close to 50% previously published essays. And the book that's there now is probably only 20% previously published material. And it's because a lot of that has something to do with the fact that I changed too much as a person to have the same perspective that I had in many of the essays that had been previously published. I was just a different person. I just wouldn't have written the essay at all or I wouldn't have written it that manner.

The book went from me sort of being all in my feelings about my own personal racial trauma, to me really seeing how complicit I've been in bigotry against other people. And I thought, if I'm going to be really honest with myself, and I'm really going to write something that I feel has more of an impact, I don't know that there needs to be another book out in the world where someone is sharing their trauma related to racism, or misogyny or whatever else. But I do think more needs to be written, especially from the perspective of a brown person, a mixed-race brown person, showing this is where I totally fucked up. And this is what I learned from that. And this is where I fall short as a human being, and as an organizer. So I thought that book had more value. And I thought it would have more value to me as a human being, right? I figured I would, I would actually grow into something better, hopefully, by writing this kind of book.

So I started just, like, deleting the essays out of *Southbound* and only keeping a few that I felt were still really relevant to that sort of theme. And luckily my press was fine with it. But then I started really digging in deep to things I felt really ashamed about, and thought, this is where the story really needs to be, especially in this year in this time period in this administration, right? So yeah, that whole idea of the essay collection ended up being, you know, about identity

very generally, but really about the ways that I have not necessarily been there for other groups of people, other far more marginalized people.

JENN: I'm so happy you said that too, because I remember Mira Jacob saying similarly about how *Good Talk* changed.

ANJALI: Mmm hmm.

JENN: Like what *Good Talk* was is drastically different from the *Good Talk* that we know and love today, right? And it's so funny being on the book editor side now, not just like, editor for literary publications and other things, of how much I still get this from agented Black people, specifically. It's just mired in trauma, and you don't get a break from it. And it's understandable that people need to kind of, I guess, exorcize that you know what I mean? Like, maybe I just need to get this out. But then as a book, it's just kind of like I, as another Black person, I'm not necessarily gravitating towards another trauma narrative. That is maybe too simplistic to say it's a trauma narrative as kind of a categorization, but that's how it feels in a certain way. Because we don't get a break from it. We don't get to look at joy. We don't get to look at complicity. We don't get to look at a larger conversation that you're saying you really understood that you wanted to do in *Southbound*.

[10:00]

And I don't know if you can kind of articulate [that]. I mean, I understand growing as a person, because we all are doing that. But it's not a flip of a switch, but it feels as though there is a moment where you're just like, oh, crap, that's what I'm doing. [Laughs] You know what I mean. I don't know if you know when that happened, or the progression of that for you, especially in your own writing.

ANJALI: So, I think I have been on the receiving end of a lot of free labor, quite frankly, from lots of Brown and Black people and trans people and gay people and disabled people who have been kind enough to correct me. This is not something that they should ever have to do. But I have been lucky enough because they are already in my circles, right? They're already in my tight circles. Many of the people that make up my community are Black and brown activists. They've been kind enough to say, um, you may want to rethink that. And, you know, this has happened for a period of years, right.

But I don't think my participation in complicity really came to a head until, until probably Donald Trump was elected in 2016. I had been in progressive spaces for many, many years. But I started realizing that my voice was a little too loud in the ways that I had been harmed, right? And I want to say at the outset that, you know, I don't judge anybody who chooses to write about racialized trauma. I'm just saying, this is my individual experience, and that I realized I was sucking up too much air in the room.

That, you know, I have an essay that is taught at a lot of colleges called "[Drinking Chai to Savannah](#)," and it went a little bit viral. And I was really sitting with that, when I had a lot of people tell me, "Oh, I teach your essay. I teach your essay. I teach your essay." And then I went back and read the essay. And I was like, hmmm, it is an essay I am proud of in that moment, but would I have focused on, you know, this particular racialized incident, and made it into a long essay and really explored it today? Would I have done that thinking today? Probably not, it would probably be a different kind of piece.

So a few things like that happened in the last like, probably five or six years. But then when I really sat down to write *Southbound*, and I was really delving into a lot of research. And you know, and I had also read Dr. Kendi's book, *How To Be An Anti-Racist*, and all these things started coming together where I thought, I think I talk a little too much about how I've been hurt in the past. And there's nothing wrong with talking about it. But if I am given a platform, how best will it help people? And I didn't think it was really going to be helpful if I focused the entire collection on my trauma.

I thought we needed more voices from more people, especially Brown people saying, we do have some privilege. And what we experience in this world is not the same as what Indigenous people go through, what Black people go through, what Latinx people go through. And certainly I am among the most privileged of Brown people as well. So there are many brown people who are struggling terribly. I am not one of them. So I wanted to be really specific in what I was addressing, and what I hoped would start or at least continue a conversation about looking deeper at ourselves, and really getting to the nuts and bolts of how our actions are impacting other people and trying to think about that all the time, right? And not just have our harm and our trauma sort of be where we focus our attention, especially if we have a lot of privilege. So that's sort of how that piece came about.

JENN: I was mmm-hmming a lot because it was like church. I was like, yup. I was just, yes, please. More introspection like that. And I agree, it's not to say that we should have only one. And I do feel like there is a push for us to kind of focus on that and kind of minimize ourselves in the same fashion. And I don't know that that's kind of articulated in even larger craft discussions of when you do write trauma. And I've been on like a panel about trauma, and we were talking about it and most of us were people of color on that. But I think we, you know, I was kind of just coming from a place of you know, let's look at examples of people who may not even discuss it, but they discuss moving through it. Like how in *The Reckonings*, Lacy M. Johnson in the first essay she talks about. She doesn't go into detail. But she's like, I want to talk about what the expectation is of what justice looks like for victims. Or like Carmen Maria Machado in one of her stories, she talks about sexual assault, but she never names it. She just kind of gives you the understanding, and the material to understand that something really bad happens. But you never see it, you see the after effects, and how people are reacting and how victimhood and, and people don't know how to react to people in grief. And that's what I love about that particular story from her. I was just like, she's exploring this in a very specific way that doesn't need to just be like trauma, here's a platter of trauma. It's, let's even, not even name it, let's acknowledge it, but not like, show it to you. So that you have to take an understanding of what

your responsibility is, or our responsibility is. In terms of like, how do you react? How do you act if you do act at all?

ANJALI: That's so true, Jenn. And of course, I've loved both of those books. And I thought they did a great job of focusing on the aftermath, right? And I want to say too that an unexpected consequence of me looking more at the way I've sort of been an active member of systemic harm is, it actually kind of helped me heal from my trauma. I mean, it really did. I mean, I was actually when I looked at the ways that I had contributed and continue to contribute to white supremacy, I was really able to get past a lot of things that had sort of just festered inside of me and I couldn't, I couldn't do anything with it, but sort of lash out about it. And when I really saw myself, as someone who daily received benefits from white supremacy, and really started looking at the ways that I contributed to harm, I was able to actually work through quite a lot. I mean, it's, it's bizarre how that happened, it was not expected in any way.

And I think for some people, it can be helpful, like, if you really do focus on the ways that you're causing harm, you're almost too busy to spend so much time focused on your own individualized trauma. Because you're building something new, and you're building something new and better with a large community of people, right? And so, when you're not able to focus so much time on your own trauma, and you are working for the greater good of not just yourself and your individual community, but multiple communities, right, multiracial, multi-ethnic, multireligious, multi-elder. I mean, when you are really looking at the big picture and spending a lot of your energy looking at this bigger picture, and how do we dismantle white supremacy and misogyny and transphobia? How do we disassemble ableism? It's very freeing. It's like liberation, to have these discussions and to think about what we're doing and how we can change our behavior. I feel very empowered knowing the ways that I'm complicit because I can change this, I can be a different person, I can actually serve other people better. And that makes me feel really powerful. It makes me feel like my voice has value. Whereas when I was just sort of in my own trauma, I couldn't get out of it. I couldn't see out of it. I couldn't get anywhere with it. But I feel like I'm in a healthier mental space by actually seeing myself as a potential problem. I mean, it might seem counterintuitive, saying that, but I feel emotionally and mentally healthier looking at the ways that I'm problematic. It makes me see a goal and try to reach that goal and strive for something better for everybody.

JENN: There's so much to that too, because I was thinking about it as you were speaking, especially when you said the part about feeling more empowered, and all that and I was like, "Oh snap, yeah, 'cause then you don't..." Yeah, it does switch. And I personally don't feel like it's counterintuitive. It makes a lot of sense to me. And it also makes me wonder more about those conversations when you do interact with people—and I know we both have, and will continue to, sadly—who gets so caught up in being disliked potentially or needing to acknowledge, right? It's like, "Oh, my God, I don't want to acknowledge that I've caused pain." It's just like, they get defensive. They start doing the martyr syndrome, they just deflect and all these things that they've put up to kind of, like, prevent that from actually seeping in. And I do wonder, I'm like, is that limiting to you as a person? And it's not to say horrible people, because I think we all have to just work through that. And I'm like, yeah, is there a limitation there? Because I also, like you,

feel like, once I can acknowledge that, I can also just have better relationships with people. And I can also understand who is toxic for me. Because I'm just kind of a cutoff person, which may or may not be healthy for whatever reasons. But once I hit that wall where I'm just like, "Oh, you're really not ready to acknowledge stuff. You're really not ready to see this. I can't help you." So, I'm just going to dip out, right? And I'm okay. I may be sad I lost the friendship or the relationship. But I'm okay at the end of the day because I'm like, I recognize this is not about me, and I have to continue to do this work, and I can't do the work for them and etc, etc, etc.

[20:30]

ANJALI: That is so true. And incidentally, I agree with you, with respect to hitting the wall and having to cut somebody off like that is a completely reasonable and justifiable reaction because I have to do that with some people, too. You know, you have to be in a place where you've at least made the effort to crack the door open, right? I'm happy to then push the door all the way open and welcome someone in, but they have to have started to open the door themselves, right? You have to be in a place where you've started letting down your defenses so that you can productively receive critique of positions that you have or language that you've used. And if you're not in that space, I have found over the years that my personal investment is not going to yield anything but more trauma to me, right?

Now, I think as someone with a lot of privilege, my threshold for trauma is much higher than others. So I acknowledge that, right? So, for example, because I'm an organizer, right, and in organizing, you really do have to deal with a lot of people who are very early in their journeys of self-examination and understanding the layers of bigotry and the ways that they have been complicit in white supremacy. And I have a lot of privilege. So I'm able to work with people without so much injury to myself to a higher degree than other people are, right? And so I try to invest in people who have it, or at least in the early stages of acknowledging.

But then I also have a breaking point, right? Like I cannot spend days and days on people who are still saying things that, like, people crossing the border need to wait their place in line, right? People crossing the U.S.-Mexico southern border, they're not doing it the quote "right way." I will engage in that conversation for a certain amount of time. I will do the labor of, you know, sending them articles or speaking with them on the phone, if necessary. But then if there isn't a glimmer of progress in that conversation that just becomes them taking up my time and energy that I actually could have put towards another person who was more open to that information and to that point of view. Then I'm just losing time, right?

I mean, the perfect analogy here is actually a lot what the organizing work: my organization, they see Blue Georgia did for the elections. We decided based on what we had all learned from Stacey Abrams and other Black organizers in Georgia who have been getting out the vote long before we existed that when you look at the cost benefit analysis in Georgia, it is actually not worth anyone's time to try to convert a Trump voter. However, it is *really* worth people's time to get out the vote in the likely Democratic voting community. You will get back what you put in in spades if you instead help an elderly person get to the polls, right? You will get back what you

need in spades, to invest in communities that have long been invisibilized by politicians who simply aren't voting because they've been disenfranchised for generations. If you invest in that way, you will get them to the polls, and they will vote for Democratic candidates. Whereas you can spend hours and hours trying to argue with a Trump voter and not get anywhere. So I learned how to sort of really allocate my time and my energy, the past few elections by watching other organizers, by learning from them, by participating in their forums, by listening to them and what their priorities are. And that can really be applied to anything in the social justice realm, right?

I mean, if you take a look at where your investment in time and energy is actually going to move the needle and acknowledge where it's just not going to move the needle. Because you don't need to be, you know, this beacon of light for people who are wearing sunglasses and looking the other way. I mean, you need to be for the people who are kind of taking a peek out behind those sunglasses and wondering what's going on and what, what is this conversation? And maybe they're interested in learning from this conversation. But yeah, it's really about looking at our mental and psychological resources and deciding where to invest it and not investing it in the places where we know we're not going to get anywhere.

JENN: It's exactly my ministry.

ANJALI: [Laughs]

JENN: It's exactly—I just turned 40 two months ago, less than. I'm just like, no. Even before I turned 40, I was just like, I don't have this level of time. I just don't. And if you want it, then pay me, at least. At least allow me to pay off my WiFi for the month if you're going to ask for that level of labor.

ANJALI: And, you know, we have to acknowledge too, that a lot of this work is about people really not making it a priority. If you're really not going to make it a priority to understand racial justice, right? You might have bought all the Black author books on the bestseller list. If that's the limit to your investment and understanding racial justice and social justice and Black Lives Matter, you know, you're not there yet. You're just not in that place yet of really understanding what's going on. It's time for us, who are invested in it to then disengage and put our energy somewhere else. I mean, I think we've been in this rat race for so long. People have had now, years of really open and blatant bigotry and anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism and ableism and transphobia. I mean, like, how much more do you need to witness as an individual to realize you're part of the problem? So yeah, I mean I, we've got to put a stop to it, especially those of us that have privilege, but not at such a grave expense to us, because we're not going to get anywhere anyways.

JENN: Exactly. And so you explore this very, I guess, not blatantly, but more, you know, kind of, we're not kind of getting the metaphoric method of understanding this in *Southbound*, like you're really telling it straight in a lot of ways. And then you have *The Parted Earth*, your novel, which comes from different perspectives, covers different time periods, and you're articulating a

different level of story. And that's not to say, it's like, oh, this is about trauma. But it is about, like, identity and inheritance, which is so funny to me in a way. Because like, I'm looking at the subtitle to *Southbound*, it's like essays on identity, inheritance, and social change. And I was just like, wow, those are themes within *The Parted Earth*, just in a different context with the characters that you're talking to. You know, it's in different regions, it's in the U.S. It's in Asia, it's in Europe. We're seeing the breakings of families, the growing of individuals, we're seeing so many different things that you're doing, again, in less than 300 pages, which is a feat. Not everyone is able to do that.

So when you're going from the nonfiction to the novel, and you did say that the novel was something that you had progressed in in your MFA and doing that, prior to the essays kind of becoming a solidified thing. How did you toggle between those two? Does that mean you were concentrating in fiction for your MFA?

ANJALI: Yes. I mean, I think you kind of hit the nail on the head when you said that, when you were reading between the two books, that they're very similar themes. I mean, you know, sometimes I feel like I really just write the same thing over and over again. But with a slightly different, just a slightly different perspective.

I think as a writer the theme that I find myself most fascinated in is how are we all connected with one another as human beings, right? I feel like every essay I write, I feel like every article I report on, every piece of fiction I write, and certainly the novel and the essay collection, I feel like I'm really just trying to answer this one connection and question. Which is: In what ways are we all connected? In what ways do we affect one another's lives? Either knowingly or completely unknowingly, right?

In *The Parted Earth*, the heart of the narrative, the center of the narrative is that this horrific tragedy happened almost 70 years later, and a descendant named Shan Johnson has no idea that this is part of her family history. Not only that, she's not even connected to her Indian heritage through her father who had passed away 30 years earlier. And so she's trying to figure out where her place is in the world. Where she's connected to her ancestry and to her culture. And though those ties are severed, she's trying to figure out how to knit them back together in order to feel like a whole person.

[29:52]

In some ways, Shan Johnson's quest in *The Parted Earth* is actually very similar to my personal quest in *Southbound*, which is how do we get more in tune? How do we build a community with people that we are not already in community with? From my perspective, as an author, it almost feels, it was kind of easy for me to go back and forth. Because a lot of the editing did happen at the same time, even though *The Parted Earth* was written quite a bit earlier.

And I want to give a shoutout to Hub City Press, because *The Parted Earth* was actually 15,000 words longer than the book is now, which I think is roughly 250 pages. But my wonderful editor

was like, cut out 15,000 pages. And when I, when I heard that at first, right, I was like, gutted, I was like, oh, my gosh, there's no way. And of course, during my very next reading of the book, I knew exactly what to cut out. Because it was so clear to me what wasn't essential to the story. But when I was doing things like copy-edits, or other types of line-editing, going back and forth between the books, because it would be very often, whereas, like, I would get a draft of *Southbound* back and have to make changes and then turn that in. And as soon as I turned that in, I would get *The Parted Earth* back and have to make changes.

But I really felt during that time period that this nine months or so that that was happening, that the books were very similar, even though they told completely different stories. Thematically, functionally, they seemed to have the same purpose. So it wasn't as hard as I thought it was. And I still kind of view both books in a similar light. It really is, how we, as human beings, reach out to other people and bring them into our lives and our communities and really see them, really see them as people, really listen to their voices and their stories. And how do we uplift them? And how do we create authentic relationships with one another? And how do we support one another? So in that sense, they just seem so similar to me.

JENN: I think about that, too, in terms of the thematic resonance that continues to pop up in your work, but it pops up in one's work, but you're still effectively doing it in different ways, right?

ANJALI: Yeah.

JENN: Like you said, we can talk about, quote-unquote, the same things and it never appears that way, to the reader, or maybe even to us in the creation, which is very interesting to me.

So can you talk a little bit about *The Parted Earth* in terms of, you discussed, like, kind of like a really quick elevator pitch of it. But in terms of the writing of it, because you said again, this was something you started years ago, and then you pitched it to Hub City Press, or you submitted it or something like that. I'm not sure how Hub City works specifically.

ANJALI: So Hub City is a wonderful press, small nonprofit press in South Carolina. And they have, I can't remember, if it's once a year or twice a year, they have an open submission period. And you do not have to have an agent to submit during that online open submission period. And I am unagented. And I submitted the book. And I thought Hub City Press is a southern press, and they published southern authors and southern stories. You know, I didn't have very high expectations, because despite the fact that I feel very strongly that I'm a southern writer--like, I feel like everything I write is very southern. You know, aside from living in Georgia, for the past 14 years, I came of age in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and I went to college in North Carolina. So I have lived elsewhere but I've always felt very southern. So I didn't know I was like, oh, this is like an international novel. And I'm Southern and Shan Johnson lives in Atlanta. But it takes place in so many different countries and so many different eras. But I was very lucky that they saw value in the book, because I had been, I think at that point, I had been trying to find an

agent for three and a half years, and I'd basically thrown in the towel. And so, I was very, very lucky they picked it up.

But in terms of the story, it has an interesting origin in that I became a writer later in life. So I'm 47 right now. And I did not seriously start writing, or even thinking about writing, until I was in my late 20s. I was 28, maybe, when I started writing professionally for small parenting magazines. But I became an obsessive reader of Partition history and literature right after I graduated from college. So when I was about 21 years old. I had heard and learned about Partition, but I didn't know a whole lot about it. So I started going to the bookstore and just buying any book I could find related to Partition and at the time, it was mostly novels. But I eventually did start reading nonfiction about it. And I wasn't a writer, I was just reading Partition all the time.

And you know, back in the early and mid 1990s, I was not an internet user then. I was, so you know, whatever the bookstore had was whatever I basically had access to. Or whatever the library had. And you know, they would order books for me when I needed them. But it's not like I would, I didn't really know then how to go on to Amazon and buy a book. Soon after that I did. But I was a late internet user. And I didn't know how to purchase books that were published in India, but not published in the United States. And I didn't know how to access books that would have gone out of print. And I didn't even know that the books existed, right, because I wasn't really using the internet. But I read about it for many, many years.

And then after I finished reading the books, still not a writer myself, I started searching online for first person testimonies from Partition survivors, and I couldn't find any. And then like, and one of my first online searches was Partition, because I was really trying to look for more articles and essays by people who had survived it. And it was years later that I learned about, you know, the sort of mass movements to collect Partition stories. And I started reading those stories again, before I could have even imagined myself as a novelist. I mean, at this time, I was writing only nonfiction, and I was only interested in writing nonfiction. So this was a very sort of long evolution and years of research before I actually even thought or had an idea of the book. So it's kind of I think, a backwards story to the process of writing this novel is that I did not consider myself a writer for a while. But even when I was a writer, I would have never considered myself a novelist until after I had actually already done at least a decade of reading about Partition. And then of course, when I started using the internet more, I started finding out more information. And I started ordering books online that were out of print and published in the subcontinent, but not published here. So, but yeah, so it was kind of a backwards thing, and that I did not actually think of the topic from the perspective of being a writer or an author. I actually just became obsessed about this era of history. I mean, I'm probably just as surprised as anybody that I ended up writing a novel about Partition, because for so long, I was simply a reader, and an obsessive reader about this time period. And had this insatiable thirst of really wanting to find stories of survivors and understand this time in history. And it took me years before I even had the idea for the novel.

JENN: It's interesting how things come about in terms of, you know, the hole we kind of dig to just get more and more information. And as that information comes about, how that also can build a story for us.

ANJALI: Absolutely. You know, I think one of the most common sayings I've heard about writing is that, you need, as a writer, you need to, to live, right? You need to be able to get your raw material to write. So go live your life, right? Go meet that group of friends for dinner, go on that hike, you know, pursue your interest of knitting. You need to just live and have full life experiences and relationships so that you have something to then write about.

And I think with *The Parted Earth*, that that was an extreme route, right? I was not a historian, I was not, I didn't even like history when I was in high school in college. So it was weird. And I think weird is a really good word. It was weird that I suddenly had this interest in history at all, because probably because most of the history I've been taught was white history, just like most of the literature I read was white literature, that I became so interested in this era and started reading about it. But yeah, it is an example of just sort of following an interest without even having an interest from being a writer. Just as a learner, just as somebody who wants to read and understand something, but without even having the motive of capturing it somehow on the page. So yeah, so it was kind of interesting how that worked out for me.

JENN: And so, these two books *Southbound* and *The Parted Earth*, like I mentioned at the top, are coming out less than a month apart, and they're both with small presses. UGA, which you said for *Southbound*, is a university press. And then Hub City is like, more kind of, it's not necessarily tied to a university. It's an independent entity. So how's that been for you? I know from working at a university press, how small the teams are. Right? The teams are small. I mean, they're small at big imprints as well. But a company can be large, right? And it's a very different thing where you're working at a university press and you're on a campus and you're dealing with those things, you're dealing with a smaller team. And there's a great level of intimacy there. They do great work.

ANJALI: Yeah.

JENN: There's so many independent small presses, mid-size presses, doing amazing work, putting out wonderful books that we all should make sure to continue to look at and to buy and to talk about and shout out and preorder, as you should with both of Anjali's books. But how is that for you?

You know, just I mean, there's a lot here. It's like (A) You're writing two books. (B) It's a pandemic. And, you know, like C, D, E, F, right? How is that, at least a small press experience for you as a debut?

[40:09]

ANJALI: Yeah, so it's been interesting. You know, and in addition to the factors you listed, right, it was the most important election year of our lives, right? And so, we've all been consumed with that.

As you know better than anything else, the publishing industry is really, really tough. And you know, small presses have less of a, they don't have the fallbacks that bigger presses have, right? They don't have the cushion. You know, these are nonprofit presses. They're not able to give large advances or even medium-sized advances. You know, they're not able to invest in publicity.

Add to that, the fact that there's a pandemic. And we were, you know, then, last year and the year before that, living under this authoritarian regime that was dismantling democracy. And it's really, you know, it becomes really difficult for small presses to sort of be recognized for their body of work. And they do outstanding work.

So I think there's a lot of noise that exists for everybody who's an author and trying to publish a book. All these authors. I mean, I really feel for every author that has a pandemic book, right? I mean, they're not even able to meet authors in person. People are Zoomed out. I mean, beyond Zoomed out. And it's hard to get readers to engage and interested in your work because of it.

But small presses, I do feel like, are publishing such important books. And it's really hard to bring those books to notice. Whether my books or other books at small presses, they still are not seen. There are exceptions to this, right? Graywolf Press, everyone seems to know, Algonquin, everyone seems to know, right? You've got some small presses who've been able to build up a reputation over years and received so many awards, deservedly so, for their outstanding books. So they've sort of broken the barrier of, you know, any sort of stigma, I think, that something came from a small press book, because it didn't get a contract from a big press book, right? I mean, I think the average person believes that. That's not something that I believe.

But generally speaking, small press books still are thought of as presses that publish books that are the rejects of bigger presses, to put it very crudely. And I feel like some presses have proven that wrong, right? But a lot of the presses are still really struggling. And even if they are receiving a lot of awards, as UGA and Hub City Press have, it's still a struggle to be noticed. It's still a struggle to get the word out for their books. They don't, they can't afford a publicity machine. And I hope we get to some place in this industry where that is not the case.

But when I look at sort of the trends of big presses and you know, purchasing one another, I do have to pause and wonder what is going to happen to the small press because they can't compete in those areas in the same arenas, right? And they deserve to be competing in those arenas.

And I'm curious about what you think, Jenn. Can I throw that question back to you? Where do you see small presses in the current landscape? I mean, my books still haven't come out yet. So

in some ways, the question is a little premature for me to answer. But I feel like you're the expert on it.

JENN: It's funny because I was talking to someone the other day. And just being on the other side, specifically, I worked for a university press. So that's usually the, that's the smallest press I've worked with for a full-time job. Like Electric Literature, that was a very good experience and I loved the team. And it was interesting to see, like, those financial dynamics between that and like, Catapult, and the ways that they're differently funded. Or Medium. Medium's an even better example, right? Like Silicon Valley money, you know, like venture capitalist money. Longreads has that kind of investment. Electric Literature relies a lot on memberships, and grants and donations in general outside of memberships.

So when you're looking at, like you said, when a big press like Penguin Random House can go and just scoop people up because they can afford to pay 20 million to sign the Obamas. And then that level of profit allows them to help buy another company that is on sale from another company, which is like, all of that is a lot. Yeah, you had, you obviously have that money to quote-unquote burn. Versus, when I worked at a university press, we were looking at very slim margins, and we relied on the consistent investment by the university. The minute the university didn't invest in us, we were screwed. And the way for them to invest in us is because we're bringing them a profit. So as long as we're bringing them more money than they're putting into us as a press, we're valuable. The minute we don't do that, we're not valuable anymore. And they may try to help us figure out how to be valuable, how to change or da da da. But you might have a lot of autonomy as a press, which is a good or a bad thing. Because the university may not understand how the press works, because they're a university and they're focused on a very specific track, versus the press, which is focused on a very specific thing. But then that autonomy may lead to leadership that is not great.

And I've spoken publicly about my not great experience at a university press because of the isolation of it, and not having more checks and balances and all this stuff. I understood how the money worked, but they also kept it hidden in a lot of ways. Of like, oh, we're doing well. What does that mean? Yeah, like I don't know what well means. I know that my salary is dictated by the university. My raises are dictated by the university. You know, like, those are things like even, you know, in-house, you're not, you don't really have control over. And so who knows what's going on at the press because a lot of stuff may or may not be dictated by that.

So I can understand, like, you also noted, if an independent press is a nonprofit, where's that money coming from? And is that money going to be consistent? That's where it really comes into play. Because if you don't have consistent funding, and like you said, the cushion from the consistent funding that you've been able to roll over, over the years, to create new positions, to do all this stuff, and to also kind of go back to your shareholders, or whomever might be your board, or whomever is investing in you and be like, see, this is what we've done with this money. It showcases just the limitations that are put on financially.

So it's not necessarily like small presses are limited in terms of just being a small press. It always comes down to money. It always, always, always comes down to money. And then it comes down to innovation. And it's like, if you have less money, how innovative are you? What connections do you have? What ways do you see, of not just acquiring books, but like getting those books out there? Are you going to, quote-unquote, get more niche things that a big pub might be like, well, we only see this as being regionally interesting, not nationally interesting. And so maybe, like a university press specifically might be like, well, yeah, we see value in this because it's going to be great academic study, and just part of what's going to be available in the future that we need to have.

And so what's more important to you as an author, then. Is it to get an advance? Is it to get tenure? Is it, you know, is it just to see the story published? Hopefully, you could get all of these things together. But depending, you might not. And even at a big publisher, you might not get a big advance, you might not get great publicity, you might not get, you might not get so many things. I think we kind of hold up a very weird expectation. And that expectation is, comes from the lack of awareness. That's my thinking on it too.

Because I agree, I feel like some people don't get small presses exist because we need them, because the system is so commodified, it's so wide, it's so ableist and all this stuff. And at the same time, we have to support the small presses in order for them to exist.

ANJALI: Mmm hmm.

JENN: And I was on a panel yesterday where, you know, one panelist who is a white woman, and she's very, you know, she's very gregarious, great person. And she's very aware of her privilege. And she's like, I'm saying this so that, you know, I'm going to be... And she, she named a six-figure salary, or six figure advance, for her book. And then the other two other panelists who are people of color, like myself, said, you know, I got a \$1,000 advance for my book from this press. And I got a \$12,000 advance of this book from this—and they weren't Big 5 presses, they were like, small, independent, or, like, in the one case, I was kind of surprised. But it's just like, they weren't big five. And the white woman who spoke was publishing her first couple books with the Big 5, and they saw the commercial value. And then for the people of color, they, you know, they're like, "Oh, it's niche." And then the woman, the white woman also said, when I started doing other types of books that weren't seen as commercial, I saw a significant drop in my advances because then she did publish with independent presses. And it was a significant drop. And it's like, yep, it sucks. It's like, I wish certain places could be more competitive. And they can't and then, and then I'm like, why are we paying someone \$500,000 for literary fiction? You know, like, why, like, half a mil? You know, like, seeing these deals now, like, half a mil for real, that's what we're gonna pay for this? And it's not to say art isn't valuable, but I'm just like, okay, the disparity here is wide, y'all. It's *wide*.

[49:56]

ANJALI: It really, really is. So my total advances for my books were the amount that some journalists get paid to write a single article. Okay. So it wasn't a lot. And I know, it wasn't a lot. And it's not small presses at fault for these advances, right? If they had more money, they would pay them and their staff is completely overworked and underpaid. I mean, really, I mean, what they have to do to get a book published is, for what they earn, is really quite something.

You know, I do want to be transparent, because I feel like I've been very lucky in the sense that one, I have been in literary circles for a long time. So I, you know, I had established relationships with people because I was a book critic, right? So I know editors who publish author interviews, and so I'm going to get a lot more opportunities than the average small press author because I was already somewhat connected in the industry, right? You and I go back a while, so. But I go back a while with a lot of editors at a lot of publications, who, when they found out my book was coming out, they reached out to me before I even got a chance to reach out to them. So I am lucky in that respect.

And the second way I am lucky is that I hired an independent publicist. And, you know, I really feel like this is something that more authors should be transparent about because my books are going to get more opportunities. I mean, I'm kind of speaking optimistically here, right. My books aren't even out. So hopefully, hopefully they will. But they will likely see more light because I hired professionals to do the job. Because the staff at my small presses are so small, they can't put as much behind the books, even though they do do a magnificent job. I am certainly going to be on slightly more equal footing because I hired an independent publicist. And that requires wealth. I mean, that is very, very expensive.

I grapple with this as a small press author as well, that I am able to elevate my books in the eyes of publishing, because I'm able to afford to do so. And most small press authors aren't able to do it, because their advances don't cover a fraction of what an independent publicist might charge. Now, I will say that I was very lucky that I got a fair amount of money for the audiobook deal for *The Parted Earth* and that did cover a lot of the expense for an independent publicist. But still, it's not something that a lot of people can do.

And again, here is where socioeconomic status comes into play in publishing. Being able to afford to be an author is really something. I mean, it requires so much of someone. And most people can't do that. Most people can't have access to a lot of these things, because they simply, they simply can't afford it. They can't pay for these expenses. You know, if a small press, a lot of presses nowadays are not really doing a whole lot of editing, right? My presses did, but other presses aren't. So some people really do feel like they need to hire line editors that they need to hire other kinds of editors. And I also hired these editors. I hired authenticity editors. I hired a page proofer. So yeah, so there's a lot of expense in getting a book published. And as a small press author, you are just not even given the financial cushion to do that, because your press can afford it. So yeah, lots of, lots of socioeconomic issues end up coming into play, for authors and for the presses.

JENN: It's a lot. There's a whole episode that can be done on, like, the financial disparities of just struggles. And again, it speaks to the fact that the more we support them—you can donate, listeners, to a lot of these small presses, because again, like Anjali said, they are nonprofits, and they do accept donations. So buying the books is super great, because that helps the author too. Because that's, say you didn't get an advance or you did get a small advance, earning out the advance or just selling copies gets you to better royalty rates. So that's something that's really helpful for people to just know and be aware of. And or, you can donate to the press. Maybe you don't have enough money to buy a book, but maybe you could spare a few dollars to donate to the press. The press that you like, one that's local, one that's supporting a lot of BIPOC or you know, queer and trans and disabled artists. So that's something for listeners to just be aware of. Just like, if you have the means, please donate to these spaces, 'cause believe me they need it.

ANJALI: Absolutely.

JENN: Penguin Random House doesn't need more donations. Like they don't even take donations, they're for-profits. But Hub City, I'm sure they'd appreciate it.

ANJALI: Yes, absolutely. And you make a good point. I mean, if you can buy books directly from the presses themselves, even. I mean, you know, of course support your local independent bookstore, that money then stays in the community. But if you're buying outside of that, consider buying the press, the books directly from the small presses. I mean, that helps them the most. And you know, there are other ways to support, right? If you can't afford to do such things, you can share their books on social media. I mean, that goes a long way. You can feature the books on a blog that you write or on Instagram. And be conscious of the books that you choose, right, make sure you have a lot of BIPOC authors or other types of marginalized authors. And be sure you take a look at the presses. And you know, and aren't giving all of your online attention to only big press books, but are really trying to diversify the kinds of presses that you feature.

Because there's so much great work out there. And a lot of it just disappears immediately after publication. And we have to find ways to support these books in these presses in multiple arenas, and to really do our best to shout them out, and shout out those authors so that they don't so quickly fall into obscurity. I mean, most books do fall into obscurity. But I think if we all make a collective effort to try harder to give these books and these authors space, maybe we'll be able to save a lot of these presses that are struggling.

JENN: Yes, absolutely. And your libraries too.

ANJALI: Yes.

JENN: Requesting these books from small indies and small/indies can be really helpful to see circulation. Because if they see a book is constantly requested, they'll buy more copies of the book. I don't think they're taking donations of books. Like you used to be able to buy a book,

and if it was in good condition, you could donate it. But due to, obviously, the pandemic, they're not doing that, though. I would check before buying books and then donating them to your library, because that might be moot.

Or make a little library, little—have you seen all those Instagram posts?

ANJALI: I haven't.

JENN: I've been wanting to do that, have a little library, just like a home or neighborhood little library that you kind of build a little, looks kind of like a treehouse, that's a library.

ANJALI: We have one right around the corner from our neighborhood. It's so cute. And I have put quite a few books in there actually, over the years, and they get taken and they get replaced with other books. And it's right next to, like, a park. So it's frequently visited and a range of genres. So yeah, it's this wonderful little community-like event that feels almost magical, those little libraries.

JENN: I want to do one in my area, I feel like there's really— I live in Queens, as I mentioned, and there's this really hot area, like we had a stadium, a Forest Hills Stadium, which has obviously been closed. I feel like that might be a good place to put a little library. And thereabouts. Because it's near transportation. And when people would go to the stadium, or just kind of move it up a bit, more, maybe closer to the transportation where people can just get books. Because there's a lot of eateries, you could do a little bit of shopping. And so I'm just like, hmm, maybe that would be a good place. Or maybe just more residential would be good. I don't know. But it's something I've been percolating on.

ANJALI: I think that would be a great idea. And I mean, I think, you know, it makes you feel so connected to others when you see little libraries. And it's just such a great reminder too, right, a visual reminder to maybe not look at your phone, to maybe pick up one of these books instead and spend your evening reading them instead of scrolling on Twitter. I mean, I'm giving out advice that I sometimes don't follow myself.

JENN: Same, same. It's like, I literally have all these stacks of books that I've bought and have been sent and have been accumulating, and it's just like... so maybe I'll let people know what I'm eating for dinner. It's like, why, why?

Anjali, it has been such a pleasure to talk to you. This has been such an invigorating conversation. And I'm just so psyched for everything that you're doing, that we can show even more support through the purchasing of *Southbound*, and *The Parted Earth*. Again *Southbound* out April 15, *The Parted Earth*, May 4. Thank you.

ANJALI: It is always an honor to hang out and talk to you. And I'm really hoping that we have the most beautiful of post pandemic reunions when we get the chance. Because I saw you on my very last trip out of town in New York, in January right before the pandemic. Because right after

that is when I started canceling my other trips in March. So you were one of the last people I traveled to out of town to see before the pandemic. So I'm really hoping you're one of the first I get to see after the pandemic.

JENN: Oh, I'd be honored, I'll take you out. I'll treat you. I'll treat you to all the good eats that were—

ANJALI: Just like even with masks, outside and with hand sanitizer, it will still be a beautiful reunion.

JENN: It will be, it will be! I'm enthusiastic.

So how can people get in touch with you? Make sure to pre-order, keep in touch about your events, or keep or keep abreast of your events? Because you'd have a wonderful website which I was complimenting before I hit record. It's just wonderfully done by Mira T. Lee and so it's very clean everybody. So you should go to it because it seems to have all the info.

[1:00:02]

ANJALI: It does. It has all the information, I believe, to purchase. I also have a Linktree that is basically my name, Anjali Enjeti. So if you're able to search for that, I have on there links where people can pre-order. But my website, as you mentioned, also has those links. On the home page there's some buttons underneath the covers of the books. But yeah, it's my—as you mentioned, Mira Lee did a great job on my website and made everything very clear and clean and accessible. So yeah, so there should be the links that people need there.

JENN: And that's ANJALIENJETI.com.

ANJALI: You got it.

JENN: So again *Southbound* out in April, and *The Parted Earth* out in May.

Thank you again Anjali.

ANJALI: Thank you for having me Jenn, this is such an honor. I'm thrilled.

JENN: And thank you all for listening.

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