

# Libro.fm Podcast

## Episode 16 - Interview with Ling Ling Huang

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[Music]

**Craig Silva:**

Hi, welcome to the Libro.fm Podcast, the monthly series where we talk to authors, narrators, booksellers, and more. My name is Craig.

**Karen Farmer:**

And I'm Karen. On today's episode, we sat down with the author and musician, Ling Ling Huang. Ling Ling is a debut novelist. Her first book, *Natural Beauty*, was just released in April. And Craig, I would love to hear your thoughts on this book. I know I really enjoyed it. I will say that based on the blurbs that I had read and the little I knew about it, it wasn't at all what I expected. I was very surprised.

**Craig Silva:**

Yeah, this book was on my radar anyway. I do this thing as you know at the end of the year where I pull all my favorite book cover designs together as the resident designer person. And before I even knew we were going to interview Ling Ling, this book was on my designer radar because it's a gorgeous cover. And I didn't read what it was about at all before we started reading it. I literally judged a book by its cover, and I was also super surprised. It had elements of horror in it, which I was totally not expecting, between the name and the styling of the color. And as you know, I'm a big fan of horror, so also a big fan of this book. What about you?

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh, yeah. Full same. I was a huge fan. There was a strong thriller vibe that I am always here for. I loved the writing in this book, and during the podcast, I also really loved hearing from Ling Ling about how some of the main core experiences that she describes in the book were actually pulled from her real life. And so all of you will get to hear about that momentarily.

**Craig Silva:**

Yes, and shameless plug time. Subscribe to the podcast if you don't already. And if you do, please rate and review it.

**Karen Farmer:**

And as always, thanks for listening to the podcast. We really hope you enjoyed the interview.

[Music]

**Karen Farmer:**

Welcome to the podcast, Ling Ling. Craig and I are so excited that you're here with us today. We both just read your book and very much enjoyed it, which we'll talk a lot about today. To get things started, we would love it if you could introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us a little bit more about who you are and what you've been up to.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Sure. Okay. Thank you so much for having me on the show. My name is Ling Ling Huang, and my debut novel *Natural Beauty* just came out a few weeks ago, maybe a month ago now. And besides that, I've worked as a classical violinist most of my life. So yeah, first time having a book in the world. And other than that, I spend most of my time hiking with my dog, writing, and reading.

**Craig Silva:**

What's your dog's name?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

His name is Boba.

**Craig Silva:**

Nice.

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome.

**Craig Silva:**

That's cute.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

He's like a little black ball, so-

**Karen Farmer:**

Aww.

**Craig Silva:**

All right. We're going to demand photos after this call.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yes.

**Craig Silva:**

How does it feel to have that book in people's hands after all the hard work to get it to a publication date?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

It's pretty wild. I feel like I almost didn't realize that all of the work we'd been doing would result in a physical object that people would have. And I feel like as a violinist, what I do is really vulnerable, performing, hopefully giving a lot of my heart on stage, but this is a permanent thing that people can access all the time. So it's a new kind of vulnerability for me, but it's exciting and I feel like it's many stages of it hitting me that it's happened.

**Craig Silva:**

What have you been doing the last few weeks to either market the book or celebrate?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I've been eating a lot and cooking [inaudible 00:03:51] celebrate. I love cooking. I feel like whatever I can do to help with marketing, I'm doing it, whether that be talking with people, going on a book tour, things like that, meeting lots of people, which I'm pretty shy generally, so it's been really interesting to stretch those muscles. But yeah, it's been really amazing to see the support that I've gotten from my publisher, from my friends. It's been really amazing. I'm really grateful. And a lot of it also, I was surprised by how protective I feel of myself, so I'm trying to just stay offline and to immerse myself in nature and to remember that my worth isn't tied to this one thing, which I used to fall into that trap with violin a lot, like this performance defined me or this album, so-

**Craig Silva:**

Sure.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

... I'm trying to think of this in the same way.

**Craig Silva:**

When you say stay offline, do you mean comment sections and GoodReads and all that kind of stuff?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah, for sure. As a reader, I love participating in those communities, but whether or not it's something great or something bad that someone has to say, I want to still be able to write whatever chaotic thing I want to write next, so I'm a little protective, which has been surprising I guess because I was raised in a conservatory background, so I'm used to pretty ruthless critique for violin. But yeah, so it's been fun to meet myself in this whole process in ways I didn't expect. Yeah.

**Karen Farmer:**

Well, huge congratulations on the release. You haven't been looking at it, but we have, and we have just seen and heard so many great things online about this book and could not agree more, so major, major congrats. We're going to play a quick clip of the audiobook for our listeners so they can just hear it and get into the world a little bit, and then Craig is going to dive in with our first question for you.

[Music]

**NARRATOR: Carolyn Kang:**

At the end of each night, I would kick off my shoes, eat leftovers from the kitchen, and strip the burned skin from my hands. I felt triumphant when I could get a large piece off all at once, like peeling off an opera glove. Months of lightly fling myself had made the raw skin baby soft, and I sometimes fantasized about submerging my whole body in the sink, shedding everything.

"May I have one?" She slipped into the seat opposite mine, gesturing at my leftovers, coiling her legs beneath her. I masked my surprise with politeness.

"Sure. They're cold though." She picked at the soggy fries, pushing them through a small opening between her two front teeth. I was mesmerized by this action. The gap caused a soft musical whistle when she spoke, as if she had songbirds in her throat. She sighed, and the birds took flight. I felt grimy sitting across from her, surely exuding the smell of recycled frying oil from every orifice.

"Man's greatest invention, don't you think?"

"The potato with salt," the woman said, licking a finger. I said nothing. Carla was glaring at me from behind the counter, prematurely accusing me of stealing a wealthy customer. "Did you know that they can be toxic? Nothing serious. You won't die from a potato, but it can make you very ill," she said.

I smiled reflexively. Rich people have all the time in the world to pick up random anecdotes for small talk. She suddenly leaned in, peering at me with an inquisitiveness that made me stop breathing.

"Wait a minute. I know you."

[Music]

**Craig Silva:**

So again, congratulations on the book coming out, which like you said, came out about a month ago on April 4th. And for listeners who haven't had a chance to read it yet, I would love if you could give us a little synopsis of like the premise.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Sure. *Natural Beauty* is about a really talented pianist who finds herself in a really unfortunate situation. She has to care for her parents, so she ends up giving up this really promising career, and she ends up in the wellness and clean beauty world, this fascinating unregulated space where she totally drinks the Kool-Aid, but while she's working there, she's realizing all of these unsavory things, and things get really wild as she becomes acquainted with this dark underbelly of the wellness industrial complex.

**Karen Farmer:**

I have seen *Natural Beauty* categorized in so many different ways, which I think is really cool. It evades genre categorization because it's part of so many. I've seen horror thriller, dark comedy, satire in some catalogs. So I'm curious, in your own words, how would you classify this book?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Well, I was pretty shocked when I saw that it was marketed as a horror novel, but I guess it makes total sense. I think that there is a lot to be horrified about what we are doing with women's bodies, what we're doing to ourselves. So it makes total sense, all of these things about it. I'm not sure what I would classify it as. Maybe just near future or speculative fiction. I wouldn't be surprised if at the rate we're going that this is eventually a non-fiction book. And so much of it to me, when I was writing it was an

emphasis on the love letter aspect to classical music and to my immigrant parents, so I think I focus more on those things, but one classification I really like is dark wellness.

**Karen Farmer:**

I love it.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah, [inaudible 00:13:05] core. And yeah, also just the idea of what do we do with prodigies? And as someone who used to be labeled one, I went to conservatory when I was 15, it's like, what do you do with that energy? And when that potential is gone, when you grow out of it, or if something happens to you, what do you do with that? So yeah, it's a lot of things to put in one thing, so I am not sure. I never really thought about that.

**Karen Farmer:**

That's great. That's awesome. So you mentioned the parallels to the prodigy aspect of it and the importance of family and wanting to represent that. And I think I read somewhere that you had worked in a store, I believe, that maybe you drew some inspiration from for the holistic scenario. Is that right?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yes, the store that I worked at, it was truly lovely in comparison, but I had a really long-

**Craig Silva:**

You have to say that, right, in case any of your old coworkers read the book?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Exactly. Which I think a few of them have picked it up, and one of them actually texted me on release day and she was like, "Clean beauty is the most toxic world I've ever worked in." And there was a gratitude from some of my coworkers for putting out the truth, because the store was great and we had a great comradery, but there are things about the wellness industry that are just really manipulative and there's a lot to get into there. And it monetizes our insecurities, like any other beauty industry, and it's conflated self-care with capitalism in such aggressive ways that it's really difficult now to figure out what self-care actually looks like.

But anyway, it was a good place to work. Definitely really bizarre interactions I had with customers and even sometimes coworkers that made me question a lot about the industry. And I had just moved to New York, so I was trying to get my foot into the door freelancing as a violinist, and I needed to make rent money in the meantime, so I was working here and I thought a lot about the parallels to the world I was leaving and the world I was entering. And also, I was thinking a lot about my parents who moved to New York after the Cultural Revolution and just thinking about how I have every advantage compared to them. They didn't have GPS then, they didn't know English, and I was struggling so much. So it had this renewed respect for who they are and how much they've done for me.

**Craig Silva:**

Given all the similarities between the main character and yourself, obviously it's not autobiographical, but there's elements of that, how have your parents reacted to the book?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

They haven't read the book.

**Craig Silva:**

Do you want it to stay that way or...

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I think they are reading it slowly. English isn't their first language, so I think they read maybe a few lines, a couple paragraphs a day or something. So they're going through it slowly. My dad said that he teared up during some of the early parts with the parents, which was really sweet to hear. And yeah, I think they'll have a lot of fun as they keep going. I remember my mom was terrified that it was going to be a memoir. Every day she was calling me. "It's not a true story, right?" I'm like, "Why are you so cute, mom?"

**Craig Silva:**

Oh, that's awesome.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah, so not a memoir, thankfully for her.

**Craig Silva:**

And you, I think. Yeah.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah, definitely.

**Craig Silva:**

So as you mentioned, you're an established violinist. I'd love to hear how you went from being so immersed in the music world to the point you were freelancing and playing with big orchestras and all that to, "I'm going to write a book," and just went out and did it. I can barely do my one job really well. How are you doing multiple really hard things this well?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Oh my gosh. Well, I don't know if I'm doing them well, but I am certainly trying. That's the only thing I can really say about myself with pure confidence is that I work hard. But yeah, I think a lot of things translate for violin. It's a lot of time alone in a room by yourself with your own thoughts, and writing is very much that. And a lot of my writing came from classical music has no prescribed meaning, so I'll listen to something I really love and have really complex feelings about it, and I will want to figure out what those feelings are. So it's unraveling these complex feelings. That's how I got into writing. And yeah, I've been playing violin since I was four. I had my first concert when I was four. Everyone and everything in my life basically said, "You're good at this, you're going to have a great career in this."

But I just felt like at every turn, the career options that were offered to me were not appealing. In order to play with an orchestra professionally, you have to take auditions, and it's a really soul-sucking, grueling process that often takes years. You have to pay for your own travel, and wherever you're staying for the

audition, we practice eight to 10 hours a day sometimes. And you have to give up so much of your own voice. So a lot of why we love music is because we love expressing something a certain way and we find a specific meaning that we want to indulge and express. And then in order to win an audition or to get any job that's available, you have to give up all of that expression for what they're looking for. And it's definitely privileged in a way, but I just felt like I wasn't willing to give up those things.

A lot of what they're looking for in a sound is the sound that was popular in the seventies and eighties when it was all male violinists recording. It's loud. It's not what I identify with in terms of what I want to express. So I kept giving up these things or not going all the way with certain things, and a lot of this book came out of that grief of not finding the right path or place for me in this world that I really love. I love the repertoire. I love playing, and figuring out how to do that just for me out of love and not as something that gives me status or money or anything like that. So that's how I started writing about this as well. A lot of it happened during the pandemic when we as an industry lost work, and it was bizarre to have everyone suddenly in the same boat as I was, searching for more.

**Karen Farmer:**

That's so interesting because topically, I see how those things resonate with each other. And then just the nature of the book itself seems like a reaction to feeling like you couldn't express yourself. It is so expressive. It is so vibrant and colorful and ever-changing, so thank you for sharing that.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Thank you. I'm glad that it reads that way.

**Karen Farmer:**

So very related as well. You talked about how these two avenues, your two avenues of art interlock with each other. One thing we were wondering about was the aspect of being on stage, being in front of people. You mentioned that you were a shy person, and so the exercise of going out and doing book signings and meeting people, doing readings is a thing in and of itself. Has your life in music performance helped carry you through this process of being out in the world talking about your book, or do you find that it's a totally different learning experience?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I think it's very similar. Part of being a musician is you have to meet with donors and they do take you out to meet with people, to write letters. And I feel like doing a lot of these donor events has prepared me in a way. And I had two book events and I just felt so grateful for people who were there because I was having nightmares a few months before. I was like, "This is a terrible way to find out that I don't have any friends." And finally, when they happened, I was so surprised to see these are the communities that I have managed to build and I'm so grateful for them and I can be way more myself than I can at a donor event where I have to be buttoned up and I'm really representing whatever orchestra or board member, whatever is there with me. And I can be my goofy self. These are all people who know me and who, until the book, maybe didn't know how much therapy I needed, but they have willingly decided to be in my life. So it's been, I think, a more positive experience.

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome. That's great.

**Craig Silva:**

Yeah, I love that. And you mentioned building communities, and one thing that I read about you that I really enjoyed and wanted to hear more about was that you've partnered with Music Kitchen, and I was wondering if you could tell us about that organization and what your experience was like.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Sure. Music Kitchen is such a fabulous organization. It's by this incredible violinist and woman, Kelly Hall-Tompkins, and I think she's been doing it for 15 to 18 years, and so it's partnered with Carnegie Hall. So we've played in Carnegie Hall, we've premiered 15 short pieces that were written just for us, but primarily our work in New York was always going to shelters and playing works for them. And then we commissioned 15 of the best composers now who are living to collect words that we've gotten from shelter clients and to arrange them into songs, and we made sure to play them for them first before our Carnegie Hall premiere, which was last April actually. And the recording's coming out soon and we might be going on tour. It's really fabulous. And I was really happy to be a part of it when I moved to New York because my artist diploma thesis in conservatory from my last couple of years was working with different Houston shelters to bring music to them.

It's just a lot of people, especially in Houston where I'm from, are kicked out of their homes because there are a lot of traditionally conservative backgrounds, and so there are especially a lot of teenagers who are without homes. And it was always really heartbreaking to me, but there are a lot of incredible gay classical music composers who were composing at a time when they were not allowed to be gay, like Benjamin Britten. He and Peter Pears, his partner, they're celebrated in Britain now, but they weren't out when they were composing and singing, and so I always wanted to give them a musical community in that way. So to be able to continue that work in some way in New York was super meaningful.

**Craig Silva:**

And I love that. That organization sounds amazing and I can't wait to hear that when it comes out.

**Karen Farmer:**

Yeah, we'll share the details in the show notes so that other people can check those out too.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

That's great. Yeah.

**Karen Farmer:**

So in the realm of the auditory, you might have assumed we would want to ask you about the audiobook for *Natural Beauty*, given that we work at Libro FM. So I'm making some assumptions here, but given that you are a musician, I feel like perhaps the audiobook might have been of particular interest to you in terms of the audio qualities of it, if there was music included during the transitions. So I guess we were just curious what your involvement was with the audiobook process, things like the narrator selection or any of the choices that had to be made in the production.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

The only thing that I was asked to input on and that I really had a choice on, I think, was the pick of the narrator. And so I don't know, I didn't know that an audiobook was actually happening until I just got an email and it was full of auditions. And I was like, "Whoa." I remember I was backstage for a rehearsal and I just started listening to them and it was so fascinating. So here's a weird confession, I guess. I'm really



bad at listening to words. I'm not sure what it is. So when I listen to audiobooks, I have to go back so many times. My partner gets so annoyed. And even TV shows and things like that, I often go back, but I wonder if it's because I spent so much time listening to not words that things become really just sounds to me.

But I had so much fun listening to these auditions and just, there are so many different ways for meaning to be expressed. I think one of my favorite poems, I think it's *Song* by Alan Ginsburg, and he reads it, and there's like one line that he reads three different ways. And that is how I felt listening to the audiobook. It opened up so many new ways of meaning for me that I was like, "For anything else I write, I want to just have different people read it," because it so much for me as a writer and thinker to explore what this new inflection might mean for the character and for the rest of the book. Yeah, so that was really fun and a great surprise.

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh, I love that. You're like, "I guess this new edition of my book is coming out. This is great. Let's keep it going."

**Craig Silva:**

When you got all the auditions in the email, I don't know how many there were, but how did you decide which one to go with? How did you make that decision?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

It's so personal, I'm sure, the way that everyone listens. I think there were some auditions that were a lot more theatrical, and maybe because of my personality where I'm shy and maybe distrustful of performative things, I shied away from something that was too theatrical, and I looked for someone's voice that I could easily escape into. And really, the person who reads it, Carolyn Kang, I think her voice is incredible, and there was so much room for interpretation and different meaning in the way she reads, and I felt like I could hear resonance. And she reached out to me after the audiobook was done and released and said that she had grown up playing piano, and there were so many similarities that she had with the character. And in hindsight, I felt like maybe that's what I was hearing was this understanding that she had. This connection.

**Karen Farmer:**

That's magical. And you touched on the act of listening to your own book as well and hearing it differently through someone else's voice, and we've had a couple of authors we've talked to tell us that they were physically unable to sit down and listen to their own audiobook. They said, "It's too intimate for some reason to hear my own words read back to me. It's too powerful. I need to let some more time and space elapse before I can sit down and hear these words." How do you feel? Are you in that same camp? Do you think you're going to sit down and listen to the entire thing end to end? Or maybe you have already?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

It's like a hostage situation because my partner really wants to listen to the whole thing through. And I think I would feel like it's way too close. I can't stand listening to my own voice, but because Carolyn's voice is so amazing, I'm like, "Okay, fine." But yes.

**Craig Silva:**

Hostage situation!

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I'd be begrudgingly listening. Her voice definitely saves any of that feeling I usually have to listening to my stuff.

**Craig Silva:**

I love that. Speaking of listening to spoken words, I read that *Natural Beauty* had quite a bit of a fight over options for a potential TV show, which is crazy, because I think all of this was going on before it even hit the shelves. So can you tell us how this happened? How people were already fighting to make this into a TV show before anyone had read it? Well, I'm sure they might have had opportunities to read it, but you know what I mean.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I was just as shocked as you and maybe still am. I think being a debut novelist, you have no idea what's normal and what's not normal. And then now that it's been some time I'm like, "That was not normal," in the best possible way. Went through with the book deal and I was like, "Awesome. Edits soon." I had imposter syndrome immediately, so I was like, "I need to write another one." And then I got all these agent meetings, setups, and I was like, "Oh my God, my agent is dropping me." And he was like, "I'm just setting you up with a film and literary agent." Film, TV. Oh, that's so much better than-

**Craig Silva:**

Than what you thought?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah. And so I ended up going with this amazing woman who, she put together *Nomadland*, and so she was so committed. She was like, "Yeah, it's my wedding weekend, but I'll be checking emails." I was like, "Do [inaudible 00:33:05] emails." I was like, "Hollywood is nuts," and then she set up 10 meetings pretty quickly within the span of a few weeks. And so it was like, all of these people somehow have copies of my book and they're reading it really quickly and they're having meetings where... You guys have read the book, so someone pitched it as *Devil Wears Prada*, which I thought was really fun. That was maybe the adaptation that wouldn't have occurred to me, so that was a really fun call.

But I did meet with two people that I really, especially, I loved their vision, and eventually we were like, "Would you guys consider meeting together and seeing if you would want to work together?" So that ended up being Constance Woo of *Crazy Rich Asians* and writer of *Making a Scene*, and then the guys behind *Yellowjackets*, who are so great. I love *Yellowjackets*, so it's a perfect partnership. I'm watching season two now and every episode, I'm like, "Man, they just want all the cannibalism IP." But yeah, it's perfectly unhinged, and so I'm really thrilled.

**Craig Silva:**

God, that must feel surreal to be watching that show and knowing the team behind it is going to be working with you next. Congratulations. That's so exciting.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Thank you.

**Karen Farmer:**

Well, in addition to what you just shared, is there anything else you can share with us and with our listeners about what you'll be up to next, what we can look out for?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Oh, well, I am working on book two, but you never know with books, so I'm working really hard on it. And even if it doesn't become anything, it's so fun to write. It's based in the performance art world, and it's still, I hope, focusing on relationships. And it's a very personal thing to me, the relationship at the heart of the book, so in a way it felt more like an exorcism than writing. But yeah, so that's been really fun, and yeah, I'm just trying to do random projects. I'm playing a lot of my usual gigs with Oregon Symphony and Grand Tetons Music Festival this summer. I'm acting for the first time ever this coming week in an indie horror movie.

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh my gosh.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Just whatever there is to do, I want to try it. It might be [inaudible 00:36:03], but I like it. Yeah, I like to do new things, so-

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome.

**Craig Silva:**

Oh my God, that's amazing. I like that you're like, "I don't know, I can't believe people would think it was horror." Meanwhile, I think you said on your website you wrote a horror screenplay, you're acting in a horror movie, you've been talking about exorcisms.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I know. It's wild. I have to just admit that, yeah, I was first day that *Beau Is Afraid* is out, I'm like, "I'm here. I'm at the theater."

**Craig Silva:**

Do you have a favorite horror movie suggestion? Karen and I also both like horror, so I'm curious, do you have any recommendations for us there? We usually save recommendations for the end of the episode, but now I'm curious.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Well, I'm sure you've seen all of the... Because I'm a nascent horror fan, so I'm sure you've seen *Midsommar* and things like that. Yeah.

**Craig Silva:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I did love *Beau Is Afraid*.

**Craig Silva:**

I haven't seen that.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah, it's wild. But it's beyond... I'm metabolizing it. I'm listening to different podcasts about it because, yeah, I just need to process what happened. And I'm sure I'll go back, but Joaquin Phoenix is always so great and yeah. Awesome.

**Craig Silva:**

So as we mentioned at the beginning, before we started recording, we like to end the episode with a couple of funny little silly things. First thing is lightning round questions where we're going to ask you a bunch of little quick questions and you don't have to think about them. They're supposed to be fun. So with that, Karen, you can ask the first one.

**Karen Farmer:**

All right, Ling Ling. My first question for you is, what is the funniest or most memorable thing that's happened to you while you were on stage?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Ooh, most memorable? I had a strapless dress fall off when I was, I think I was 14. Yeah, that was memorable.

**Karen Farmer:**

I'm sure it was.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

For myself and the audience.

**Craig Silva:**

Oh, no.

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh, I'm sorry,

**Craig Silva:**

Karen, I'm so glad you put this question in. That's so bad.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I smile a lot when I play and people are like, "You're really feeling the music." And I'm like, "Every time I smile is the time I've just messed up."

**Craig Silva:**

Did you ever wear a strapless dress while playing again after that, or was that the end of it for you?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

That was the end, yeah. Never again.

**Craig Silva:**

So as we mentioned, you are wildly talented in both writing and music and apparently acting, but if you could snap your fingers and have another talent or skill in a second, what would it be?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Ooh. I mean, within reason?

**Karen Farmer:**

Anything.

**Craig Silva:**

Whatever you want.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Well, if it's not within reason, I'd love to fly. If it's within reason, I'd love to just be the best chemist in the world. Just so good at chemistry.

**Craig Silva:**

What about chemistry? Are you just like-

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Well, I am a home chemist and sometimes my partner will come home and he'll be like, "What are you up to do?" And I'm like, "I'm trying to figure out how to make nitroglycerin." And he's like, "That is very dangerous, and you should not be doing that at home," so I do a lot of chemistry experiments.

**Craig Silva:**

Yeah. Watch out neighbors.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Oh, great. Yeah.

**Karen Farmer:**

That's amazing. My next one is a would you rather question. So in your book, the terrifying shop that we are centered around is called Holistic. So I'm curious if you would rather work at Holistic for one year or never eat your favorite food again?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Work at Holistic. A whole year without?

**Craig Silva:**

And what is the favorite food?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Mashed potatoes.

**Karen Farmer:**

Yes. Yes.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I really like potatoes in any way. Yeah. I'll work there one year.

**Craig Silva:**

I don't know. Oh, you must really love potatoes.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I do. Yeah, I do. That love is not to be questioned.

**Craig Silva:**

If you could teleport anywhere in the world right now, where would you go and why?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

It's bizarre. Trinity Bellwood, it's this park in Toronto, for some reason popped into my head. I really like it. There's a very cute cafe across the street. Yeah.

**Craig Silva:**

Nice.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

I don't know why.

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome. All right, so our next brief segment, we call this Instagram Story Time, and what we do is look through your Instagram and find a picture that is so striking or gives us so many questions that we can't help but to ask you about it. So we have done this, we've gone through your Instagram, and Craig, would you like to share our question?

**Craig Silva:**

Sure. And for listeners who can't see Ling Ling, your eyes just got gigantic and you had a sense of fear on your face.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yes.

**Craig Silva:**

So you were on the *Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, and per your caption, you were dressed as a space robot ninja, and I would love to hear more about that.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Okay. Yeah, that was a really fun gig. I love Questlove. He's one of my idols, one of my musical heroes, and I've spent so much of my life practicing hours and hours of violin. So the idea of playing for Questlove was amazing, but we got there, they wanted us to wear these outfits, and this was with Gunna and Metro Boomin, and then with the outfits, our violins were not going to work, so they procured prop violins for us. So in front of my musical hero, Questlove, I sat so close and mimed the thing that I have done for decades professionally.

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh my gosh.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Which was really interesting. I loved it. It was so fun, and I loved the costumes and stuff, but it was a little like, "Oh man, I wish I could actually play for him," but yeah. But that was a fun gig. All the New York gigs are wild.

**Karen Farmer:**

I think I read something in the caption too that you had grown up watching this show. Is that right? So how did it feel to be in that environment after watching it as a child?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah, it was a dream come true. My parents were so excited. Really, watching all of those shows was how we collectively learned English. So it was a really moving moment for me to be on the show with this instrument that they had taught me and fostered a love for.

**Craig Silva:**

And a prop version of it, unfortunately?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yeah.

**Craig Silva:**

Oh man, that's crazy.

**Karen Farmer:**

Well, this has been so amazing. Thank you so much for chatting with us. We do have one more self-serving question before we let you go. We would love to know if you have any recommendations for us or our listeners in terms of what you've been reading and enjoying lately?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Yes. Oh, I'm so glad I get to talk about this book that I'm reading right now. I'm reading *Venomous Lumpsucker* by Ned Beaman, and it is so great. I guess you could classify it as cli-fi a little bit, but it approaches it from such a unique viewpoint. It's someone who has to gauge the intelligence of a species, and she's hired by corporations that just want to mine their entire habitat. And so they're like, "How many extinction credits do we need?" So it's like incredibly funny and dark and you can see everything happening. All of these companies that are trying to de-incentivize you doing this. Actually, there's so many loopholes, and it's so real, but it's so imaginative. We've been playing this game of naming all of the animals that he makes up, I think. I do not think these are real animals, but one of the, thick lip pup fish. Just saying them out loud gives me so much sonic joy.

Ned Beaman is just wildly imaginative. I can't stop talking about this to anyone. Neighbors, a friend who came over to hang out with me and my dog, and I was just like, "This book." And I picked it up because on the cover, the blurb was like, "He is recklessly creative." And I was like, "Reckless? I need this in my life." So yeah, I don't know. I highly recommend this book. I'm having so much fun. I'm not done with it, but it's a cosign. Yeah.

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome. I cannot wait to get my hands on that. I'm going to go look for that tonight now. Thank you for the recommendation. And I think Craig wanted to know as well, we have a bonus question for you in recommendations. Given that you're a musician, do you have any music recommendations for us?

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Ooh, music recommendations. I have been listening a lot to the soundtracks of a couple of shows that I really like.

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

And Thomas Ades's *Dante* is also out now, so I've been listening to those. I don't know how to say his name, actually, the composer who worked on *Midsommar* and *Beau is Afraid*, but he recently... Oh, there's the dog. He recently did the soundtrack for *Beef*, which I thought was-

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh yeah.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

... must an amazing soundtrack. And then *Dead Ringers* is a show that I just finished and Marie Gold did the soundtrack for that and it's so great.

**Karen Farmer:**

Very cool.

**Ling Ling Huang:**



Yeah, so those are the things I've been listening to that are not my own book.

**Craig Silva:**

Well, thank you so much for the recommendations. I'm also going to go pick up that book. I quickly looked up the cover while you were talking about it and it's like, I think I would've picked this up anyway. The cover is so striking and awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time today. It's been so nice getting to know you and hear about your journey to getting the book out and your process and everything.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Thank you both so much for having me. This was really fun and I loved the lightning round and getting to having the freedom to just not think.

**Craig Silva:**

Yeah, that's one of our favorite parts too. It's a fun way to end, so thanks for playing along.

**Karen Farmer:**

And we'll be cheering you on, and when your second book comes out, we'd love to have you back. We'll talk to you then.

**Craig Silva:**

Yeah.

**Karen Farmer:**

When number two is out in the world.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Thank you so much.

**Craig Silva:**

Have a great rest of your day. Bye.

**Ling Ling Huang:**

Thanks, you too. Bye.

[Music]

**Craig Silva:**

Well, thank you for listening, everyone. We hope you enjoy that interview. I can't wait to see what Ling Ling does next, and I'm already dying for the adaptation of this book into a show.

**Karen Farmer:**

Yeah. I also can't wait. I will binge-watch the show of this.

**Craig Silva:**

Yes.

**Karen Farmer:**

It could be amazing.

**Craig Silva:**

I hate when I know a show is coming out and it just was announced, which means you're going to have to wait three years for it to be a thing you can actually consume. It's the worst.

**Karen Farmer:**

I don't know. There's a lot of momentum behind this, it sounds like, and from what I've read online, so I think one can-

**Craig Silva:**

There's also a writer strike though. It's already delayed out the gate.

**Karen Farmer:**

You make a fair point.

**Craig Silva:**

I remember when *His Dark Materials* got announced. From the announcement to the first episode, being available was the most painful thing ever. Same with *Shadow and Bone*. Brutal.

**Karen Farmer:**

Ugh. I love *His Dark Materials*. I love *Shadow and Bone*, too.

**Craig Silva:**

So good.

**Karen Farmer:**

Yeah.

**Craig Silva:**

Both great adaptations.

**Karen Farmer:**

Indeed.

**Craig Silva:**

Just like *The Magicians*, the best adaptation that's ever happened.

**Karen Farmer:**

If anybody's playing bingo while listening to this podcast, it's like, every episode, drink when Craig says magicians.

**Craig Silva:**

Oh God. So Karen, it's our favorite time of the podcast.

**Karen Farmer:**

Ready?

**Craig Silva:**

Please enlighten myself and all the listeners to what you are currently reading.

**Karen Farmer:**

Well, Craig, I thought you would never ask. I would be so happy to tell you.

**Craig Silva:**

Did you think I would never ask? 15 episodes, I've asked every time.

**Karen Farmer:**

And there's a script in front of me, so I'm being facetious. However, I'm so excited to tell you about what I just read because it pairs so well with the book we talked about, *Natural Beauty*, on this podcast. The author Mona Awad, who was one of my favorite writers of all time, she wrote *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*. She wrote the book *Bunny*, which is one of my favorite books of all time. Yes, Craig.

**Craig Silva:**

I'm raising my hand for listeners. I'd like to note that you gave me a little bit of ribbing when I mentioned *The Magicians*. How many times have you mentioned Mona Awad on this podcast?

**Karen Farmer:**

More than one.

**Craig Silva:**

More than five times.

**Karen Farmer:**

Mona has a new book coming out and it is called *Rouge*, and I was lucky enough to receive an advanced reader's copy. I devoured it, and it is centered around a lot of the same concepts as *Natural Beauty*. It's very much about natural wellness that has gone off the charts, and I don't want to say too much about it because, like *Natural Beauty*, it has a lot of surprises and it is very surreal. There is a lot of magical realism as one can expect from a Mona Awad book. It's incredibly dark, but also incredibly funny at times. It is mysterious. It was bizarre because I read *Rouge* and *Natural Beauty* almost at the same time, and they very much could exist in the same world. Cannot recommend it enough.

**Craig Silva:**

I did start this when you first talked about it, but I think I read the first chapter and then have not got back into it because my book list is way too long. But are you recommending that I should re-pick this up?

**Karen Farmer:**

I absolutely am. Five stars. It's phenomenal.

**Craig Silva:**

Five stars?

**Karen Farmer:**

Yeah. On StoryGraph.

**Craig Silva:**

I have a flight coming up that is long and I will bring this with me then.

**Karen Farmer:**

I hope you do. I hope you do. Okay. Well, I know you're about to read *Rouge* then for real, but what would you like to share with me and our listeners about what you've been reading?

**Craig Silva:**

Sure. I just recently read the book by Cassandra Khaw called *The Salt Grows Heavy* and-

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh, okay.

**Craig Silva:**

You've probably seen this book around and I feel like it's getting a lot of buzz right now. And this book I absolutely picked up because of the cover, just like *Natural Beauty*. It is a gorgeous cover, obsessed with it, and the book is really good too. It's super short. So if you need a good in-between book, like a palette cleanser between two larger books, it's great. And it is very surrealist and funky. It is basically, there's a mermaid and then she weds a prince, which sounds like cute and fun, but it's not. This mermaid has gigantic teeth and there's a lot of maiming that happens early on. And then there's children who are also into maiming, and then she meets a plague doctor and they go on an adventure and there's sadistic games where people are killed. It's really crazy. It's very surreal and very poetic in its writing. It's one of those books where every sentence could probably be its own little story. It's really beautiful.

**Karen Farmer:**

Its own moment. Yeah.

**Craig Silva:**

Yes. It's very, very good. Beautiful cover. Highly suggest it.

**Karen Farmer:**

I want to read this.

**Craig Silva:**

Well...

**Karen Farmer:**

Do you own it? Can I borrow it?

**Craig Silva:**

I do own it. You cannot borrow it.

**Karen Farmer:**

Okay.

**Craig Silva:**

No, I'm just kidding.

**Karen Farmer:**

Well, I guess I'll go make a purchase.

**Craig Silva:**

I shall bring it to the Libro.fm offsite that we're going to. I feel like there's been a lot of asking to borrow books on our Slack. I think everybody's going to be traveling with lots of books to lend each other, which is fun.

**Karen Farmer:**

That's pretty par for the course when you bring together 20 people that are employed by a book company.

**Craig Silva:**

Yes. Yes. I feel, I mean, we've talked about this before in the podcast on our last Libro trip, but I had a hard time shutting my luggage on the way home.

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh yeah. Yeah. Oh, this also transitions well, because I think you are really excited about the next episode we'll be releasing. Would you like to do the honors of telling folks what they can expect next from the podcast?

**Craig Silva:**

Yes, I would love to. We have teased this a couple of times on the podcast, which speaks to how excited I am about it. But if you are a listener of this podcast, you may know that I am obsessed with books by V. E. Schwab, specifically *The Darker Shade of Magic* series. And on the last episode I said something like, "Ugh, I asked for the arc before we interviewed her," and they were like, "Come on, dude. No way. The

book doesn't come until September." And I was like, "Yeah, the podcast doesn't have enough sway yet." But about a day after recording that, guess what I got?

**Karen Farmer:**

It was the happiest I've ever seen you-

**Craig Silva:**

Yes.

**Karen Farmer:**

... in the time that I've known you.

**Craig Silva:**

Well, I got an arc of this book, and it is living up to my highest expectations, and I have high expectations for this book, given the trilogy is one of my favorite trilogies ever. And I'm about halfway through and it's pretty long. I think it's 700 something pages. It's the longest one in the series, and it is so good. If you are a fan of the Darker Shade of Magic series, you will not be disappointed. It has new characters, which is exciting. And then it also has all of your old favorites, so it feels like coming home and I've just been letting it wash over me. I think I told you, I was like, "I'm going to take a break because I'm not ready for it to be over yet." And then I picked up another book and I read basically none, and then just picked up-

**Karen Farmer:**

What am I doing?

**Craig Silva:**

I can always read it again. So yes, very excited about this book and very excited about the next episode where you'll hear Karen and I talking to V. E. Schwab about it.

**Karen Farmer:**

Yes. It's so fun. It was a very lovely conversation and we cannot wait to share it. I'm also reading *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver next, so I too am reading a very large book that's going to take me a while to get through.

**Craig Silva:**

Nice. Nice.

**Karen Farmer:**

Hopefully we'll have something to recommend to you all by the time we get to the next podcast, or I may still be reading *Demon Copperhead*. Who knows?

**Craig Silva:**

I always joke that long books that are good for the beginning of the year and not the end of the year when you're really trying to hit that number, so I'm glad we're-

**Karen Farmer:**

Oh, yeah.

**Craig Silva:**

... getting these big ones out of the way now, you know?

**Karen Farmer:**

It's time.

**Craig Silva:**

Yes.

**Karen Farmer:**

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for listening everyone. As always, we would be honored if you would rate, review, subscribe to the podcast. If you're interested in signing up for Libro.fm membership and you haven't done so already, you can use our promo code LIBROPODCAST, and you'll get two audiobooks for your first month instead of just one.

**Craig Silva:**

And as always, thank you for listening.

[Music]