Dan Seed:

Hello and welcome to Big Ideas, a podcast from Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. I'm Dan Seed from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. We're joined on this episode by Jennifer duBois, an assistant professor in the Department of English where she teaches creative writing. Three novels that she has: A Partial History of Lost Causes, Cartwheel and The Spectators are all award-winning works of fiction with The Spectators earning her a fellowship from the National Endowment For The Arts. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Cosmopolitan and Salon among others. Jennifer duBois, thanks so much for joining as.

Jennifer duBois:

Thank you so much for having me.

Dan Seed:

So Jennifer, easy question to start off, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Jennifer duBois:

Sure. So I'm originally from Massachusetts, near Boston and I had sort of a circuitous path, a little bit to creative writing. I had majored in political science and I actually was hired by the CIA after college, but then went to get an MFA instead. And then ever since I've just sort of been around the world of writing and teaching writing. I lived in California for a bit and then came to Texas for this job I guess in 2013.

Dan Seed:

Right off the bat there something very interesting, you worked for the CIA. How do you make that transition from that line of work to getting an MFA in creative writing?

Jennifer duBois:

Well, so I was only hired by the CIA. I did not join. It was just in that year post-college where I was sort of floundering and wondering what should I do with my life and applying to things that seemed interesting and exciting. And so I applied for the CIA, I applied for the Iowa Writer's Workshop and then weirdly they kind of both came through at the same time. So I had this very stack and a fork in the road where I realized I would much rather spend the rest of my life writing stories in coffee shops than jumping out of airplanes and what have you. So I feel like I made the right decision.

Dan Seed:

Both interesting lines of work. Different but both interesting. So you mentioned that there's that fork in the road where you decided to go that way, but the idea of being a professional writer, was that something that you had thought of prior to that moment and what really kickstarted that for you?

Jennifer duBois:

Yeah. It's an interesting question this concept of the professional writer. I mean, I guess to me, it never would've occurred to me probably growing up that writing was something I could put at the very center of my life. I certainly always enjoyed it and I did some creative writing and in high school and college and I always loved it. I think I probably assumed it was a hobby that I would engage in probably a lifelong, but no, it wasn't until I got into graduate school that I sort of conceived of writing as something that you could at least take some time out of your life and put at the very center of it. And then it's just sort of by good fortune that I've been able to continue to do that through fellowships and now through an academic job, which at gives me time to write in the summers. But no, I certainly never would have dreamed that writing could be something that you could sort of make a life around, at least.

Dan Seed:

For you, what are some of the challenges? What are the best parts about being a writer? What do you enjoy best about it?

Jennifer duBois:

Well, I mean, I really enjoy the feeling of being able to follow your own curiosity and your own imagination. Kind of getting excited about an idea. Especially with my novels, I find that I've written them sort of based on questions that I find really vexing where I look at something in the world or I look at a situation and I just start to really wonder how did that happen or what is it like to be that person or how does somebody change so profoundly over the course of a lifetime? Or how is it the people look at the same situation and see something so radically different?

Jennifer duBois:

When I find myself really getting kind of obsessed about a question like that, that's usually an indicator that I'm at the beginning of the novel and that's a really exciting feeling. And I love that. And I love this sort of just the kind of the excitement and sort of flow that you feel, the sort of almost privacy in your own mind that you feel when you're kind of just deep embedded in a story. It's almost more fun when you're quite far from the threat of publication and you're just kind of able to kind of disappear a little bit into the flow of creating. So those would be my favorite aspects I think.

Dan Seed:

And I do want to get into that where you just talked about kind of going down the rabbit hole, finding something interesting because you utilize that in a lot of your books, especially with historical context and even contemporary figures, but you mentioned something there, this idea of starting it and writing the book and getting into it. Your first novel, A Partial History of Lost Causes was the winner of the California Book Award for First Fiction and the Northern California Book Award for First Fiction. Certainly amazing accolades for debut work, but walk us through what it was like to write that first book. And how has that changed since if at all?

Jennifer duBois:

Yeah, so that first book was originally inspired by a New Yorker article I read about Gary Kasparov, the chess champion termed dissident in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. And I thought, what a fascinating trajectory for somebody. Someone should really write a novel about that guy. And then there I was, [inaudible 00:05:24] well maybe it's me. And it's threaded against a storyline of a young woman who is facing a diagnosis of Huntington's disease, which is a terminal neurological degenerative condition which her father had died of. And she sort of grappling with this question of how do you confront a lost cause or how do you proceed in the face of a lost cause, which turns out to be quite similar to the question facing the political dissident who's trying to run this quixotic campaign against Vladimir Putin and so then their stories kind of intertwine.

Jennifer duBois:

Writing that novel was I think, when I spoke a minute ago about just that sense of privacy that I enjoy or that sort of sense of anonymity, it's very easy when you're writing a first novel to believe that you're really just writing it for yourself. And in a way, I was telling my students, you're the person that's going to read the thing more than anybody else in the world will. Even if you have some smash hit bestseller, no one's going to spend more time with that book than you will. So you do kind of have to entertain yourself first, but I think it's in that first novel writing process where you can really kind of just sort of disappear into that and not worry about... I didn't know about good reads at that point. You know what I mean? It's like you don't have to fret as much. And so I think that that's... This very liberating feeling. I think that there are, I think some challenges as well as opportunities that come with that sense of anonymity.

Jennifer duBois:

And then I think the flip side, once you've been through the publication process and you write another book and you're much more mindful of the fact that somebody else, other people will read this and oh, they're going to have opinions about it. And some of them, they won't be great opinions and they'll put it on the internet. I mean, you can't kind of jump back into that space of sort of perfect anonymity and I think there are drawbacks to that, but there are also advantages of course as well. When I think about writing that first novel, I just think about sitting in my little apartment in Iowa city and doing chess games out on my chest board to try to figure out how to write about them and just feeling very inspired but also kind of very protected in this way that I think subsequently writing novels becomes a little bit more fraught.

Dan Seed:

What is your writing process like? We have this image maybe of the writer sitting down and pounding away and Ken Burns had his recent documentary on Ernest Hemingway and Hemingway would write all morning and then stop and kind of spend the afternoon in leisure. What is your day like when you sit down to write?

Jennifer duBois:

Yes, that's exactly it. I write all morning and then I'm out fishing and hunting big game. Well, honestly, it's tough to figure out how to find pockets of time to write during the academic year. That's just always been a reality. So I tend to be someone who gets a lot of writing done in the summers and it may sound kind of grim, but mostly during the school year, I kind of set aside usually one night a week to really sink into my work. So I know a lot of writers who swear by a really kind of faithful routine of you got to get in the chair every day, you have to write a certain number of words or for a certain. That just doesn't work for me with my life because I tend to sort of need a little bit more of a stretch at a time to sort of get into the thing and that's just not super available during the school year.

Jennifer duBois:

And now I have now I have a toddler too. So yeah. Any hopes of the Hemingway asks schedule, I think are probably at this point worth the shot. But I think that it's good to know that there are different ways to write a book. I feel like I'm someone who has very little time to write and yet I've written four novels now. So it it gets done somehow whether you're sort of slow and steady and consistent or you're someone who is a little bit more of a feast and famine type type person like me. There's just so many different ways to make writing happen. And

Dan Seed:

And an added element to your novels as we touched on lightly earlier is this idea of bringing in historical circumstances or contemporary figures, as you mentioned, Putin in A Partial History of Lost Causes. What kind of research goes into your books to do that? And I imagine that can add an extra layer of difficulty and it can be consuming at times.

Jennifer duBois:

Yeah, absolutely. Which I think is another indicator of why it's helpful to be genuinely really nerdily interested in whatever you're tackling, especially if you are tackling something that has historical dimension. So with the first book, I was really interested in Russia. I had always been really interested in Russia. And so that just involved reading a lot of books. I didn't actually get to go to Russia to do any research until after the book had already sold because I didn't have any money to go to Russia until the book was sold. So I really did it through just kind of reading every kind of book I could about from a cultural history of St. Petersburg to a lot of stuff about cold war chess machinations to travel logs. I looked, I guess this was in 2007. So I looked through people's Flickr photos, their vacation photos that they would post. So it was very like ad hoc kind of approach and I'm sure that there are things in that book that a native Russian would probably take some issue with, but I did do a lot of research.

Jennifer duBois:

And then when I got my book advance, I could go to Russia for at least a week and a half or so, which was amazing because it was a very cool experience to go to a place that you had studied in such depth. And then, yeah, subsequently, I mean my most recently published book, The Spectators is set in New York city and it spans the 1960s to the 1990s and it deals significantly with the gay experience in New York and with the AIDS crisis. And so that too was quite a bit of research on the level of the gay experience, gay liberation, post Stonewall and the AIDS experience both from a personal standpoint as well as sort of a public health standpoint, of course, and the band played on being sort of seminal texts of that.

Jennifer duBois:

And then again with New York city, I was lucky in that it's just such a well-documented city that even though things there are constantly getting torn down and rebuilt and everything changes and is in such flux. But if you really want to know what a street corner looked like in 1993, there's a picture out there. You know what I mean? So again, it was probably mostly a combination of sort of deep study and deep research and reading and then also just a lot of like random internet Google searches.

Dan Seed:

When you look at your novels and you talk about this and all of this research that goes in, how much of your own experiences do you convey through your books?

Jennifer duBois:

Yeah, I mean, that's another interesting question. I mean, I think for one thing with any theme that arises from a book is in some way tethered to the subconscious of the person writing it. So the deep questions that animate me, like for example, my second book Cartwheel, which follows... It's loosely based on the Amanda Knox case so it follows this young woman on study abroad who's accused of murdering her roommate. And it's told through four points of view of people who have different views on this. Some people who are very convinced of this girl's innocence and some of her guilt. Nothing in that book is really autobiographical in any way but the fundamental question that flummoxes me is indeed this question of how is it that people of goodwill and people of intelligence can look at the exact same person or the exact same situation and just see wildly different things?

Jennifer duBois:

And that's not a question I have an answer to, but I think baked into the book is a question that's just like at the heart of my soul in some ways. That's a stupid way of putting that for an author, the heart of myself, but you know what I mean. So I think there's that. Those sort of preoccupations are there. And then the rest of them have kind of varying degrees of bits of biography, but for the most part it's... I think the biography comes through in those questions.

Dan Seed:

And your books utilize that multi point of view in them, which I think is interesting because often we just get the narrator's perspective, how informed or uninformed they are and that's the perspective that we get. But to write a book where you're bringing in that multiple perspective look at it, what do you think that does in terms of maybe making your books not necessarily resonate, but where people can look at them and better understand maybe the human condition I suppose, the way that people perceive things. Is there a reason for you doing that?

Jennifer duBois:

Yeah, I mean, I think because I am really interested in the sort of different ways that people look at the world. And I think for me, it's really interesting to try to inhabit the mind of someone who thinks differently than I do. And I hope that that's something that readers appreciate too. I don't know that they always do, but with Cartwheel, for example, it was really for me great fun to try to because I had my own private opinion about whether my character was guilty or innocent. It was great fun to then have to make the other case, think through the thought process of the person who thinks differently from me in a million different ways. I mean, to me, that's energizing and exciting.

Jennifer duBois:

And I wanted with it, with that book in particular, I wanted readers to come away with their own opinion about what had happened, but I wanted them also to have had to seriously consider and entertain an opposing viewpoint. Even if they came up with their own conclusion, but they'd had to really sit for a while with someone who thought differently and had to really kind of tilt their heads and say okay, that's why this person thinks the way they do, which I do think is fascinating.

Jennifer duBois:

And in The Spectators, there's kind of a similar kind of similar strategy at work in which you have this main character who is actually an inspired by Jerry Springer in a way. He's a progressive politician turned trash TV host and you see his story narrated through two points of view: one, his lover who becomes sort of increasingly disillusioned with him as time goes on. And then also from the perspective of his young publicist who works for him in the 90s and sort of starts the book really loving him, but then comes to a much more nuanced understanding.

Jennifer duBois:

And so I was hoping in that book that at some point the reader's experience kind of crosses in the middle too where they kind of get to see a before and after and then also sort of an after and before and hopefully they arrive at some understanding of this person that is more nuanced than either the lover when he's fully idealizing and idolizing the sky or the publicist who doesn't really know him very well and then it was him and only this sort of fragmentary sense and has a lot of judgments. So, yeah. So I don't know if that answers your question. I think that's about what resonates for me about the strategy. I don't know about yours.

Dan Seed:

Yeah, well, I mean, what I think is interesting about it now is taking this approach in this time that we live in where everybody has an opinion and it's very black or white and there's very little middle ground that it forces people to sit and read and look at things from a different perspective. And I think that that nowadays is an important thing, be it in the real world or in the case of fiction that challenge people. And do you set out to do that when you write a story like this to challenge the readers conceptions or preconceived notions at all?

Jennifer duBois:

I mean, I think it's an interesting point you raised. I do think that right now, this idea of sort of imaginative empathy is a little bit like out of Vogue, which is understandable given the political context that we're living in. But I don't know that it's the best position for an artist to take. And I certainly don't think I set out to specifically challenge anybody's worldview, except to the extent that I feel a lot of humility toward my characters. I do have a very strong sense in life and also I know that this comes up in my fiction again and again, that we just don't have anybody's number, that we don't actually... That human beings are pretty irreducibly complex and that we probably have only a very superficial understanding of most folks and and the people just have histories and stories that you just don't know.

Jennifer duBois:

And so that is something that comes up again and again in my fiction is, and you can do it pretty well through multiple POVs, although you don't have to do it that way. Just in which characters are surprised by other characters or they're just in... They're forced to confront the fact that they just don't know everything about the people around them. And I would say that that's maybe a sort of modest kind of claim, but it's something that's pretty dear to mind to my heart, both ethically and artistically. So that is something that I probably do pretty consciously kind of write into my books again and again is that just sense of people being a little bit wrong about each other.

Dan Seed:

And that multiple point of view perspective is interesting, but I would imagine that it's challenging creatively for you to be able to formulate this, to come up with these different perspectives. How do you go about doing that? Do you just kind of immerse yourself in it and think, well, what's a different way I could look at this? Walk us through that process because you don't see many books like that.

Jennifer duBois:

That's interesting question. I mean, I guess... I mean, it's a gift and a curse I suppose. I just don't have that much trouble. I mean, maybe it's because I'm a philosophy major in some ways, policy and philosophy, and then going to MFA making myself very employable, but I just don't have that much trouble making the counter argument. Do you know what I mean? Whatever the position is, even if it's something that to me is the most morally obvious thought in the world. I just don't have that much trouble coming up with how you would make the best case for the other side. And so to me, that part of it is not really that hard, frankly. It's then I think on a craft level, what's always challenging is trying to make your narrative sound different from each other because at the end of the day, there's going to be certain similarities. It's all coming from your brain. And there are a few kind of little crafty things you can do to change that.

Jennifer duBois:

To some extent, variations in diction also. I always tell my students, it's kind of a cheap trick, but it's helpful to give people different sources of knowledge or interest, because then they can always be sort of thinking things through. For example, my Cartwheel is very attuned to music. And so he thinks through that language a lot and that's just something that is specific to him. And so hopefully it adds a dimension of characterization to his point of view, even though there is going to be some fundamental sameness in the language throughout that that's probably somewhat unavoidable.

Dan Seed:

You mentioned a few times now The Spectators, your latest work, which again, earned you a fellow from the National Endowment of Arts and was highly praised in The New York Times. The New York Times review of it. One of the quotes that I pulled from it was good fiction about celebrity culture is tricky to pull off and rare. What a good surprise it is therefore to come upon Jennifer duBois, The Spectators and read a novel about a TV star that feels just right. When you read something like that, when you hear people talk about your work like that, what goes through your mind when you get a review like that?

Jennifer duBois:

Well, it's always.. I mean, for one thing to get a positive review in The New York Times, it's such a dream. It's basically like... That's probably about the best day you can have as an author. I've had two really good ones and one kind of more mixed one. And let me tell you the good ones are preferable. And in that review, I think it was by Ken Tucker, who's an author. I [crosstalk 00:21:19] in Entertainment Weekly as a kid. So it was just also kind of weird and surreal to me to be like, I remember reading this guy's TV criticism and it's...

Jennifer duBois:

And then there's also this... It's also interesting too, because sometimes what people like most about your book is not what you like the most about the book. So I really liked The Spectators. I think it's quite beautiful. I think it's quite funny. I think obviously it's a topic that's interesting to me. I would not have told you that I felt super confident that it was like a accurate depiction of a celebrity because like I don't know. But then it's great to have a TV critic seem to find it plausible, but it's interesting too because that's certainly not what I would have regarded as it's strength per se. But yeah, that was a very good day, for sure.

Dan Seed:

So how does a book like that or how did that specific book come about? You talked about going down these rabbit holes, so you find this information, you get hooked and you just kind of go down and do that research. How did that one come about?

Jennifer duBois:

It's always a little bit. So far, it's always been a somewhat similar experience of hearing some kind of real life story and thinking what? And then kind of thinking about it and thinking about it and then being like, okay, this is clearly. And it's always a little bit of an oblique relationship, sometimes more straightforward than other times. In this case, it was listening to this really interesting podcast, which I'm not going to remember if it was a fresh air or I don't know what. But it was about Jerry Springer. And it was about how Jerry Springer had been this beloved city councilman and beloved mayor of Cincinnati in the '70s. And was this really progressive, serious politician with apparently great charisma and people thought like Kennedy esque potential. And he had this episode where he paid for a prostitute with a check and got publicly shamed but then he kind of pulled through the scandal and came back and was like resurrected in this way.

Jennifer duBois:

And then apparently his early work in journalism was much more straight forwardly issue oriented. And even the very early iterations of show were kind of more like Donahue. And then just over time because of the forces of capitalism and viewership and incentives, his show became this ludicrous, ruckus, outlandish thing that we all know and then kind of went so far that it became almost a parody of itself. There were a lot of shows that were kind of in that genre at that time, but his show is almost the winkiest one of the bunch. And so again, I just was like this is fascinating. I had no idea that Jerry Springer started out as this like substantive politician who people thought. And then he tried to run for Senate in the early 2000s and people thought that was such a joke.

Jennifer duBois:

I remember that and I remember thinking what a joke that was, but then it turned out that he was really trying to reclaim this past identity rather than just suddenly forge this new one. All of that I just thought, oh, I mean, come on. That's just catnip for a writer. And so that was essentially the basic question was how does someone transform so profoundly over the course of a lifetime? And then I just thought it would be interesting to kind of tell that story from the perspective of somebody who kind of had my experience of knowing this jurisprudent character in one way and then learning what his backstory and having to kind of recalibrate and come up with a more nuanced view.

Jennifer duBois:

And then also from the experience of somebody who went through the process of watching this unfold in linear time because there are surprises we may be to learn about Jerry Springer's political career, probably the people who were his voters and constituents were very surprised to see his ultimate TV career. So I have two characters who were kind of stand-ins for those experiences in some respects. There's a lot that's changed. It's set in New York. One of the points of view is his lover and it's a gay lover because I thought that it would be really interesting if I took that scandal storyline and turn it into a real love affair. But then I thought, well, what would really be a scandalous love affair? And then it was like, well, clearly same-sex relationship but that's fine. So there's all kinds of reasons that, and things get transfigured and transmogrified and in no way is that an actual or meant to be an accounting of this Jerry Springer thing, but that was the inspiration was just thinking, oh, wow, what a wild story.

Dan Seed:

And again, we're talking with Jennifer duBois from the Department of English here at Texas State University. And Jennifer, we have a few minutes left and I wanted to talk about your students and the work that you do with them because you've mentioned that you've had this balance between being a writer and being a professor. So let's talk about your students and the work that they do. What do you like best about teaching and what do you see students bring to the table day in and day out?

Jennifer duBois:

I mean, I love teaching and especially teaching my graduate students just because this experience of getting to know them over the course of three years, getting to watch them come in, getting to read their admissions folders and then sometimes often get to serve on their thesis committee or be their thesis advisor. Just the level of sort of... The depth of that relationship, it's really profound. I mean, not to be cheesy, but it is something that I had had an experience just with teaching undergrads semester by semester. And that's very rewarding as well, but just this process of getting to kind of watch somebody develop as an artist over course of such a long time is, I don't know, I find it incredibly meaningful and I just love them. And they're very interesting. I mean, they're very interesting and crazily smart bunch of young people. I think they get like a little smarter every year, which is actually a little intimidating.

Jennifer duBois:

But yeah, they're interesting. They're all writing very different things and they're all very good at and open to understanding how to talk to each other and give each other meaningful feedback across aesthetic interests or across ethnic lines. I always talk to them about this idea of sort of your literary values, those things, those instincts and preferences that sort of guide your subjective response to literature and also your shaping of your own creative work. But also that part of the task being in a workshop is to learn how to engage usefully with the work of people who have different literary values. And they seem to have a very good kind of instinctive capacity for that. They're delightful.

Dan Seed:

So wrapping up here with Jennifer duBois. Jennifer, it's been a pleasure talking to you. What's next for you? What are you working on right now?

Jennifer duBois:

So right now I'm sort of in the midst of some revisions on a fourth novel. This is a, I don't want to go too much into the content of it, but I will say that The Spectators was such a long structurally complicated book with different timelines and different POVs. And while I was revising that book, which took quite a while, I was fantasizing about writing a book that was just going to have one point of view, be linear, just chronological, be short and be set actually in Boston in 2003 which is where I went to college and when I was in college, so, something that was not going to require some massive deep dive. So once I finished the revisions for The Spectators, it was very easy and fun to kind of write this draft straight through.

Jennifer duBois:

It felt just really kind of exciting to do something that felt so structurally streamlined, although it's a very kind of morally complicated story. So I'm working right now on. I'm trying to tinker with some of those moral complexities and try to grapple with some of the challenges of creating a very, very sinister first person narrator and trying to figure out how to calibrate voice and dramatization of secondary characters in the appropriate way, which is a very different challenge from what I've had before because I've always had multiple points of view to bounce off each other. And so it turns out that writing one point of view, although less time consuming also has its challenges. But it's fun to be working on the new one.

Dan Seed:

Always good to challenge those creative muscles, right, in different ways. And that's a book that I'm certainly interested in. Can't wait to see when that comes out as I was in college in Boston at that same time. So it's always good to get back in the scene like that. So Jennifer, thank you so much for joining us.

Jennifer duBois:

Thank you so much for having me.

Dan Seed:

And thank you all for listening to another episode of Big Ideas. We'll be back next month and until then stay well and stay informed.

Speaker 1:

Big Ideas TXXT is a presentation of Texas State University and the Division of University Advancement. Subscribe to experience more innovative thought provoking content. If you like what you hear consider leaving us a starred review, five if possible. The views expressed during this program are those of the individual participants and do not necessarily represent those of the university. Big Ideas is hosted by Daniel Seed, produced by Jamie Blaskie with technical assistance provided by Manuel Garcia. Strategic consultant is Kelly Raz.