

Episode 48: AfterWords Literary Festival with Stephanie Domet

Stephanie Domet: Critical thinking is so vital, and critical thinking — anyone can do it. Critical thinking is just looking at a piece of information and starting to ask yourself a few questions. And if you have the opportunity to ask the source of the information, a few additional questions. So when a thought arises — How do I know that? How do I know that? Where did this piece of information come from? What is motivating the source of this information to produce this information? Right? Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose? Whose voice isn't being heard here? How was this material produced? All of those kinds of questions. There's nothing special or magic or elite about these questions. This is your basic curiosity. You can train this the same way you would train a muscle, any other muscle to do anything. Pick up a weight, run 5K, whatever. Find your way around in the dark in your house. It's just simple curiosity. It is in every one of us. It is our innate human birthright. It's there. And the great news is you can just develop it and you can start right now.

Tara Thorne: The AfterWords Literary Festival kicks off its third year this week, with readings, interviews and workshops running through Sunday. Co-Founder Stephanie Domet will join me to talk about author economics, getting to make the kind of festival she wants to go to, the state of journalism, and being my first boss 20 years ago. I'm Tara Thorne and this is The Tideline.

Music Intro

TT: Hello, folks, thanks for being here. I've got my life coach — that is true — Stephanie Domet waiting in the wings to chat afterwards. It's going to be verbose and loud in here in just a few minutes. But first, I'm going to play you a brand new track from one of my favourite young artists, Keeper E., who dropped this fresh jam a couple of weeks back in the wake of her Music Nova Scotia Award nomination for New Artist of the Year. She'll play the Carlton with our friend waants on October 14th. You can check for tickets to that show at thecarlton dot ca. Yay! And here is “Fourteen”.

Song: Fourteen, by Keeper E.

TT: Stephanie, hello.

SD: Tara, hello.

TT: I know a lot of people who want to see you back behind the mic with headphones on.

SD: Well, here I am one day only. Thank you, ma'am.

TT: Thanks so much for being here. We're here to talk about your event.

SD: Yeah.

TT: But we've also known each other for 20 years. You were my first boss at The Coast.

SD: And what a boss I was. I've been your life coach ever since.

TT: That's right.

SD: You were a mere thing of 18, I think, when I met you.

TT: That's nice. It makes me sound like a wunderkind — oh, when you met me? Yes, yes. But I was 20 when I got the job.

SD: Right? Those two years were everything. (both laugh.)

TT: Everything I learned about journalism, I know from you. But let's talk about the state of journalism later.

SD: I'm not taking any responsibility for that.

TT: Let's talk about AfterWords to start, and let's just talk about — so you founded it with Ryan Turner, who's a wonderful local writer and you know, I often say, why start a venue when you could start a beer bar?

SD: Sure.

TT: You know, so why start a literary festival?

SD: When you could just stay home and write a book instead? Why not do both? I say, Why do you have to choose? Yeah, why start a literary festival? Tara, what a great question, that these days I often ask myself — Start a literary festival, they said, it'll be fun, they said. So this festival, the making of this festival, I feel like, was ten years from beginning to end. Starting in about 2008, there used to be the Halifax International Writers Festival that was on the scene for a few years. It was great. You know that feeling of everyone in town who's interested in books and writing is united in this common effort. You see everyone in your community over the course of these several days and nights all going to these amazing events and having this collective wonderful experience like we used to have in the old days when we went places in...

TT: The old days from sixteen months ago, eighteen months ago...

SD: That's right! Oh, I remember them well, increasingly, less well. So that folded up shop in 2008, and Ryan and I immediately started complaining to each other about the lack of a festival. And we had some initial meetings back then with a few other local people who were in the community and were interested. And we just couldn't get it to fly for one reason and another. The main one being we had no idea what we were doing here and I was still at CBC then, so I knew I couldn't be involved in it in any real way. Just would not have been appropriate to my schedule and the CBC — frankly, the CBC would never have let me. I was going to say, let's be honest, that was never going to happen. So the years passed. One thing that didn't change was that Ryan and I continued to complain vociferously to each other about the lack of a literary festival. Meanwhile, you know, every city across the country has a multi-day literary festival. Even some very small places in Nova Scotia have literary festivals. Maybe not multi-day, but Lunenburg has one...

TT: Cape Breton.

SD: Cape Breton has a beautiful, multi-day festival. River John has a festival. These things were happening everywhere.

TT: Sure! River John!

SD: Right! Noted literary metropolis. So. One day in the midst of our “Why doesn't someone start a literary festival in this town?” the penny just dropped for us that, oh, we might be. We might be someone. So let's figure out how to do that. And so that was the summer of 2018, and we're both quite anxious people who like to accomplish things. So Ryan immediately figured out how to register us as a non-profit with the registry of joint stocks. And I came up with a name and we started batting back and forth programming ideas and then applied for a grant and then oh my god, got the grant, and then we were making a festival. And now here we are three years later, still making a festival.

TT: Still making it. I mean, I can understand as someone who lives here and likes culture and stuff why you would want to start a festival. But but that is not an average response.

SD: Well, I guess we're just not average people. I don't know what to tell you.

TT: I mean, when you thought it, when you talked about what you wanted to see, what were some of the things that you wanted to see before you ever got the chance to do it?

SD: Yeah, yeah. So we really love conversations. We really love to hear writers talk about why they do it the way they do it. You know what that way is, the ideas that really kind of — this is a phrase we use a lot, the ideas that push them to the page. As readers and as writers ourselves, we just love those kinds of conversations, and he's got two books, I've got two books, we're both still in — I guess that's called midcareer, right? But, there's so much more that I want to learn from other writers, and the opportunities for that are kind of few and far between in Nova Scotia. You know, the Writers' Federation puts on amazing workshops, but I'm one of their teachers. Yeah. You know what I mean? There's a lot, a lot, a lot of great programming for people who are trying to develop their writing practice, but not as much for people who want to deepen their writing practice or who just want to be in that critical mass of writers and readers who get to be together, kind of getting that kinetic energy from each other, and really engaging deeply in this thing that we quite nerdishly love. And so we wanted to make the kind of festival we wanted to go to. You know?

TT: Yeah.

SD: And that's what we set out to do. And so we thought, in the beginning we thought, well, it doesn't matter if you have a new book, we don't — maybe we don't care about that. We just want to bring writers who we love, and who we want to bring, and who we want to hear talk, and learn from them, and put up masterclasses that writers who are already established in their practice could step it up a notch, you know? With a really skilled practitioner, and just make that kind of atmosphere, and still have lots of programming that would be of interest to a general kind of bookish crowd, and workshops that would appeal to writers who are at the beginning of their practice as well. But just to really offer that kind of full-feeling, well-rounded, all-encompassing festival experience is really what we were craving.

And once we started, once we were registered with joint stocks, it was like, okay, well, I guess I made a website, we have a Gmail address, let's just see what we can — and if we can't do it fine, and fair enough, we'll put it down. But you know, at this point sort of ten years on from our initial conversations, he'd been running a business the whole time, right? He runs a — like a mad science — they do like camps and go into schools. So he has a lot of experience with doing budgets and spreadsheets. He loves that stuff. I hate

that stuff! In the 10 years I gained a lot of experience hosting events and putting programming together and, you know, feeling very easy cold calling people and asking them to do something, because you do that all day, every day on the radio, you know? And so we just, we sort of arrived at this moment — a decade into this ongoing conversation or this ongoing complaint — with the skills that could push it forward and the time — we're both self-employed — and the desire, you know, and nothing better to do and no one to say no to us. So, so why not?

TT: Yeah, yeah.

SD: Yeah. It's a potent mix, it turns out, all those things.

TT: Yeah. You know, I was on the board of the Halifax Pop Explosion for many years, and so I learned about budgets and it's always funny to me every year when the Jazz Festival announced their line-up and someone goes, Why don't they bring Diana Krall?! Or like at the Pop Explosion, and they go, Well, can't you get whoever? Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure, do YOU have a million dollars? Yeah. So I don't know the economies of authors. I assume they're a lot lower than the economy of music. But when you started searching out, what kind of rude awakening did you have?

SD: Oh man, we just had no idea what we were doing. Like, really no idea. And we spent hilarious evenings at my dining room table trying to guess, you know, well, how much? How much do you think David Chariandy would charge? You know, how much do you think Tanya Tagaq would? Like, how do you even do this? And one thing we discovered is that in the main, Canadian writers are just very glad to have been asked.

TT: Haha! I bet!

SD: And they will come for, I think, for a nice swag bag. And American writers? No, that is not the case. So we were met with, you know, I would say, like for someone who's maybe been on the New York Times bestseller list, but not at number one, and has one or two books, kind of the opening fee just to have the conversation is like \$20,000 USD...

TT: Holy.

SD: ...plus first class travel. Most of them travel from New York, but some L.A. Plus, you know, we put our writers...

TT: Hotels and incidentals...

SD: ...we put our writers in the Waverly, on Barrington Street, which is extremely charming and awesome, and we've been really glad to work with them. But you're not going to put Celeste Ng in there, probably you're not going to put Roxane Gay in there, probably you're going to put them somewhere that's going to cost you more per night. So, and everything is in U.S. dollars. And we don't, we didn't have those, at all. But we started with the kind of naiveté and — the stakes were really low for us in the beginning because we hadn't done it yet, so we could — it's like writing: when you're writing, sometimes the stakes can feel really high. But if you can remember that you don't have to show that writing to anyone or even tell anyone that you're doing it, then suddenly the stakes can be low enough that you can allow yourself to get close to the page.

And so in that first year, when really no one knew we were doing it, and we had no reputation or anything, we could just try and fail. So we sent a lot of really optimistic emails, you know, and then got terrible news in return. And so then it was just that process of, oh, OK, so maybe by year five, like, being able to bring someone who was on the New York Times bestseller list and whose opening fee is \$20,000. And I mean, we were also met with, Oh, this person, her fee starts at \$55,000 dollars, but we're open to negotiation.

TT: Sure.

SD: OK. Let's be real. I'm in a jurisdiction with fewer than a million people. I'm never going to pay \$55,000 to bring someone, so I don't want to waste your time. What are we talking about when we talk about negotiating? Well, she really couldn't do it for less than \$25,000. Good to know. OK, we'll talk to you in 10 years. You know, if we can get a big Canada Council grant for our 10th anniversary? We'll talk about it. So it was this process of like, yeah, just finding the margins of it and and knowing, OK, well, you know, presenting that kind of author is something we want to grow toward. So let's just put that in the back of our minds for year five or year seven. And for now, let's just make the best program we can of writers we're interested in. Let's just see what we can put together, and that's how we made our first line up, was just who would write back to us because they wouldn't always because, you know, we were writing from our personal email accounts, and I have a few, I know a few people in publishing, but not really, you know?

But I was working every teeny weeny little connection that I had to try to get, to find out who was the right person to contact, and how could I get them to — what do I have to say to make this person write me back, you know? And then finally, we realized agents are really invested in their clients working. So let's write to these agents. Let's look at these agencies. They all list who their clients are. Let's see who we like that's on their lists, and let's write to some agents because they're going to write us back. And that's that's how we cracked through.

TT: Yeah, and they'll tell you, no, but they'll be nice about it.

SD: Absolutely.

TT: They don't know — they don't know you.

SD: That's right. They don't care.

TT: That's the thing about America. They keep, they say no, but they're like — but you could, something could happen later. I'm not going to ruin this now.

SD: And that was the case with one agent we wrote to for an American writer, who was like, Well, I love the way you're swinging for the fences. And if this is who you're coming after, you must be on the side of, right? And so stay in touch. Right? Which was great. It was like, OK, good. Now I know what this ground is, and I know how to walk it. You know, we were so nervous in the beginning, talking about money. We didn't want to insult anybody, it was very Canadian. And now I'm just like, How much do we have in the budget? I'm just going to tell this person, This is what we can offer, and then they can say yes or no. And that feels like a huge amount of learning in three years, you know, like overcome our sort of polite Canadian way of trying to do business, and now we're just very upfront about it.

TT: Yeah, I went through a similar thing with casting my film. There's sort of — I'm like, "Will you send this email to this one person?" And she's like, "Yeah, it was a No." And I'm like, "Right. But like, how was it?" She's like, "It wasn't rude, but it was curt."

(both laugh)

SD: Yeah, yeah. You do get good, quite good, I think, at teasing out the, you know, this email is so uninflected, but sometimes you can see, oh, this door is still open. And sometimes it's like "Oh, she doesn't get out of bed for less than \$10,000 a day." Like: "How dare you?"

TT: Yeah, it's an assistant, you're not getting the person.

SD: God, no, definitely not.

TT: OK, so here comes the dreaded COVID portion of the interview. Because you did your first year. Would you consider it a success?

SD: Absolutely. Oh my gosh. Absolutely. You know, no one knows who we are, and that's fine. There's no reason they should. And I mean, like in Halifax and everywhere, you know, I don't think we're really on anybody's radar.

TT: Halifax is usually the last to know, let's be honest.

SD: So there you go. There you go. But so we had small crowds the first year, but it was so exciting to be presenting that festival in person. The writers we invited were all incredible. They all had such a good time, and we had such a good time with them. And that was really one of the other things we wanted to do, was to invite writers we admire and then show them the best possible time in our town that we love, at the most golden time of year. You know, in early October. And we totally accomplished that and it was really fun and we were so tired by the end of it. I was the kind of tired where I thought someone should probably just arrest me, because I think this is illegal to be this tired and still participating in society. But it was, yeah, the audiences had an amazing time. Our sponsors were happy. We were happy. The writers were happy. And that, to me, is a total success and we managed to do it again the next year.

TT: You're right. BUT!

SD: Yes! Dunt dunt daaahhh! (ominous music sounds)

TT: Yes. So generally what happens is you're already planning the next thing before the first thing even ends.

SD: That's right...

TT: So you were doing this...

SD: Yeah...

TT: And at what point did you have a lineup locked, or near it, when the world shut down?

SD: Yeah. So for us, the grants that we apply for are all due around October 1st, which is ...

TT: That's cool!

SD: ...also when our festival happens. It's really cool. Yeah.

TT: Why aren't you writing a grant right now?! (laughs)

SD: 'Cause Ryan's doing that part. This is my part. That's his part. You know, hilariously, during our first festival in 2019, when we were planning, and then when we were in person pulling it off, every day one of us would turn to the other and say, "Well, this will be so much easier next year because we'll already know how to do this. You know, so much of it is teaching yourself how to how to do it." So in in the fall of 2019, we regularly reassured each other with this information that 2020 will be easier because we'll know what we're doing. Ha ha!

So then The Thing happened. We had nobody locked in, I don't think, when that shutdown happened. We were in some conversations with some writers. One who is in L.A. who wanted to come but needs to fly business because of a physical situation, and we knew, and then needed to be in a hotel with a pool for so he could do his physical therapy. And we were like, Oh man, OK, that'll be our whole budget, you know? So we were kind of at that point in our discussions and then we just stopped talking to anybody for a while because we were depressed and we couldn't figure out, you know? You know, you remember how it was. Anyway, then we got ourselves back together, and for a long time that spring, we talked about, could we? Could we plan two parallel festivals, one with just local writers, not just local writers, but featuring local writers, and one with writers from away that would happen online? Could we run them both? Could we plan these two kind of shadow festivals and then just press play on one of them when the time came and disregard the other? We went back and forth about this. It was really hard.

TT: So budgetary concerns too?

SD: Yeah, for sure. Yeah. Yeah. And we didn't want to — we're both artists, and we've both been in the kinds of situations where you're an artist and you're invited to do something and you're not really respected. And we never want a writer to have that feeling afterwards. Ever. Oh man, that was really important to us. And so we also didn't want to be going through the motions of booking this thing that we were only booking as a — you know, just in case.

TT: Right.

SD: We don't want do that to the writers. And so, anyway, there was a point in the spring where we realized, OK, we just need to flip to virtual so that we can plan because we just couldn't move forward. So just make the decision if it's the right decision, great, if it's the wrong decision, oh well. Yeah, our job right now is just to keep this thing alive. We don't have to make it amazing. We just have to keep its embers warm. That's the job in 2020, was what we decided.

TT: Yeah. And I think every festival was faced with that. I worked for one as well, and it was sort of like that conversation that you have every day: Are we going to flip? What is this festival doing? Like the last day I was in the office at HIFF*, I called all the festivals

like, "What are you doing?! What are you doing?!" And they were like, "WE DON'T KNOW!! WE DON'T KNOW!!!"

*Halifax Independent Filmmakers Festival

(both laugh)

SD: Well, oh, it's so hard. It was so hard. It's hard anyway, you know, and we're — it's just the two of us. And we're both basically volunteers at this point. We've managed to pay ourselves last year, we were able to pay ourselves a very small honorarium.

TT: Yeah. The magic word.

SD: So we work like magic with hours and hours and hours, hundreds of hours. And then if we're really good sometime in October, we will pay ourselves, you know. And so it is just brutally hard, to do all the things. In those circumstances, yeah,.

TT: Totally, but one thing it did open up is, to go back to your \$55,000 situation, is...

SD: Ha ha, ha ha, yes indeed...

TT: ...is, Roxane Gay is not someone you could ever bring here. But this made it happen.

SD: That's right. Yeah. Knowing that we were going to be virtual, it was like, OK, well, that changes the game. Now we can bring Cory Doctorow from L.A, via Zoom to our audience. You know, we can pay him a great fee and not pay flight and hotel and per diem and all the things that we would do, you know, to show a writer a good time. And we always have this conversation, we're still not really sure where we fall on it. We talked to other festivals about it, too. Do you try to get a headliner, a quote-unquote headliner, or do you simply build a really solid, mid-tier, just a great middle hitter line-up of amazing writers knowing that, you know, I mean you can write for a really long time, and no one, and be amazing and nobody, you have no name recognition. That's just, that's just that business. It's just the business.

TT: It's all the businesses.

SD: It's all the businesses. That's right. So there will always be a small time. Thank you, Corrine Raymond, for that. So do you do that? Do you make your line-up out of like amazing, incredible writers most people haven't heard of? Or do you make a slightly smaller line-up out of those writers and try to get a headliner? So COVID allowed us to do that. And so we just thought, well, no one is working, so let's see how much money we could get. Can we get some additional money out of our community of sponsors to bring Roxane Gay? And the answer was yes, we could. And she was talking a lot online about how she wasn't working, so I thought, let's e-mail that guy who was so nice, and just see if she would do this for us. And we negotiated with him. And finally, we all arrived at a fee that we could handle and that she could accept. And suddenly we had Roxane Gay booked for year two of our festival.

TT: Yeah.

SD: That was the thing that happened to us.

TT: I remember you did a vague tweet that was like, I'm about to close a deal or about to announce something. And I was like, (whispering) "Is it Roxane Gay?" And you were like, (whispering) "Yes."

SD: (laughs) Yes.

TT: I don't know how I knew! (laughs)

SD: I know how you knew either, but it was like the wildest feeling of, Wow, this is really happening. We're going to bring her to our festival...

TT: Such validation!

SD: Oh my gosh, it's amazing. Yeah, she definitely did not have to say yes to us — she was working. You know what I mean? She had other offers, but it was so, yeah, it was just incredible. And then to be able to — We wanted to make this festival because we wanted to make something cool for Halifax, the city that we love and to think of actually being able to bring Roxane Gay to our audience in Halifax was like, this incredible, like, Guys, we got you this amazing present!

TT: Yeah, it was so nice. It's like a Sunday afternoon thing...

SD: Totally.

TT: ...had some snacks...

SD: Yeah.

TT: And she was very — and she didn't phone it in. I mean, she literally phoned it in, just not actually...

SD: Zoomed it in! But, yeah, she was incredible. She gave everything that you would want. And more. And Mary Lynk, wonderful Mary Lynk from CBC Ideas did an incredible job on that interview. I mean, she was like, "Your grade 11 English teacher, Salisbury..."

TT: "Salisbury James Lipton..."

SD: "...in 1979..."

(much laughing and over-talking here)

SD: "...you know, standing on a street corner, you were standing at the corner of Young and Davenport with Mick Jagger, and you said to him..." Yeah, it was very much that, the kind of incredible interview that Mary does. And then it was broadcast on Ideas, which was also incredible. You know, twice we've had that, that Ideas has picked up our programming and carried it, which is incredible for us. So yeah, it was a big — it was hard. It's hard to teach yourself to make a virtual festival. Oh my gosh. But it was, yeah, totally rewarding. Totally rewarding.

TT: Sweet. Well, I'm going to come back to the third year lineup at the end. All right. I want to talk to you about journalism for a minute.

SD: OK, well, there's something I haven't thought about for a while.

TT: I know. So, you know, I joked before we came on air that everything I learnt about journalism, I learned from you. And that is true. Like, you were my first boss at The Coast. I didn't know shit about shit...

SD: I knew slightly more.

TT: ...And you were like, Here are the rules. And one of the things that you taught me about that I still like, I think about it literally every day, is conflict of interest.

SD: Oh yeah.

TT: And you know, we have both seen journalism is such a pile of shit. Like, it's a mess.

SD: It's different.

TT: Literally on my way here, someone's like, "I gotta pitch a newsletter for this job interview! Can you help?" And it's like newsletters is where we're at now. We pivoted back to video...

SD: Yeah.

TT: ...and I have seen — I really feel, and CBC too, which was sort of the last bastion of journalistic standards and practices — ironically, for me to be talking about...

SD: Hah! Haha! Hahahaha! Oh, I like this so much!

TT: But you know, there's a fucking advertising department at the CBC now! Like where, like, how do you feel about the state of things? Because I don't know how the King's journalism school can sleep at night being open?!

SD: Yeah.

TT: What are you doing?!

SD: I don't know!

TT: And I have lots of friends who teach at King's and they're all lovely. This is not the point. The point is we don't need any more fucking journalists because there's no journalism.

SD: Right.

TT: What is your — what are you feeling?

SD: Well, thank you for that very broad question. (laughs)

TT: Everyone loves a broad question. (laughs)

SD: Who doesn't? That's the — this thing should just be called "Broad Questions."

TT: "With a broad."

SD: Exactly. I think it writes itself. Yeah, my feelings are many and various. Certainly it is, uh... certainly there has been some decay and degradation...

TT: Decay, yeah.

SD: ... I would say, yeah, in the way journalists are asked to do their work, and able to do their work, and that's a real shame. And we all suffer for that societally, I think, culturally. On the other hand: there is a vital role for newsletters, I think, actually. Not necessarily ones that come from big media companies, but the opening up of space. Let me tell you a little story. So one time I was on a flight, I was going to Salt Lake City for a work thing, and I sat beside this guy who was an older white guy who lived in Salt Lake City, was Mormon and had a, you know...

TT: Classic Salt Lake City.

SD: Classic Salt Lake City. And he was very curious about, like, how my husband was going to get along without me at home and that I must have made a bunch of meals for him before I left. And you know, we had that conversation, and somehow we were talking about, you know, the internet, the old world wide web, and the the space that it opens up for a lot of people to say what's on their mind, tell their stories. And I was talking about how exciting I think that is to hear from these voices who were never able to get a seat at the big white table before. And his take on it was that he was concerned there were a few too many voices, you know, and that they were going to corrupt our children. And we left our conversation at this. I said, I think kids are cooler than that, actually. You know? I don't think you have to worry about the kids being corrupted by a variety of voices. But I often think about that conversation because it really is... Yes. Mighty journalism is definitely falling. That is a terrible thing. And something else is coming up.

And so I, I'm sort of caught in between feeling like, Wow, you used to be able to to kind of do something as a journalist that contributed to society, to your community. You know? I think that's harder to do now in a big media outlet because...because the structures that were always there are just more visible now. I think that's what's happening. I mean, there's long been an advertising department at the CBC, you know, and marketing and all of those things play a role, I guess a necessary one. I mean, they definitely pay your check, so there's that. And then even that is like, I don't want to think about who pays my check. I just want to serve the people I'm here to serve, which is my audience, right? So. I think what's happening right now is just the structures that have always been there are just more obvious because please god, let this be late stage capitalism, right? It's like it's all being revealed. It's pretty gross. Oh, it turns out we didn't want to see how the sausage got made. It's disgusting. Put that back behind closed doors.

But at the same time, what's happening is that there is this space that's opening up that's been opening up for other voices that haven't been able to, you know, to get behind a microphone, to have a by-line, to exist inside that power structure, that's easier for some people to exist in because of how they look, who they are, where they come from. And so that space is there. And so there is, yes, this, like, constant wearing away of an industry. But it's also an opening of space for these other voices, and I feel really excited about that.

TT: I am curious, like the rise of the alt right in the US. We know why. It's very distressing to see it parroted here, and our media has eroded as quickly as America's. And if people

still believed in their newspapers and in the newscasts, maybe that QAnon alt right shit wouldn't have dug in so hard.

SD: So here is the thing that is in the gap between the decay of the system that we had and the opening of space for other voices. The thing that needs to be in the gap is critical thinking.

TT: (laughs)

SD: Critical thinking. Critical thinking and my imagination, my two best friends, my two best friends and I love them so. And critical thinking is like, OK, right now, full disclosure: I have positional vertigo and a sprained knee, and critical thinking is like that. Like, you know, somebody has to stand outside. And when I say somebody, I mean my spouse has to stand outside the bathtub while I take a shower in case I fall out because my knee gave out or my vertigo kicked in. So critical thinking is so vital. And critical thinking, anyone can do it. Critical thinking is just looking at a piece of information and starting to ask yourself a few questions. And if you have the opportunity to ask the source of the information, a few additional questions. So when a thought arises, how do I know that? How do I know that? Where did this piece of information come from? What is motivating the source of this information to produce this information? Right? Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose? Whose voice isn't being heard here? How was this material produced? All of those kinds of questions. There's nothing special or magic or elite about these questions. This is your basic curiosity.

You can train this the same way you would train a muscle, any other muscle to do anything. Pick up a weight, run 5K, whatever. Find your way around in the dark in your house. It's just simple curiosity. It is in every one of us. It is our innate human birthright. It's there. And the great news is you can just develop it and you can start right now. You can just ask that about anything that you're hearing, reading, receiving in any way. How do I know this? Who is delivering this message? What is motivating them? What's their agenda? What else is happening in this space? Just be curious, and when you can develop that curiosity, I mean, that's what you're doing as a journalist, ideally, you know, you're always bringing that.

Learn to be a critical thinker about numbers. "This activity increases your chance of getting cancer by 50 percent." Oh my god, that sounds very terrible. But you need to look at what was my chance of getting cancer from that in the first place? Was it point zero zero one percent? And now it's point zero zero two percent? That's a manageable risk. So it's like taking your critical thinking and bringing it into the space where journalists used to do that work for you. But they had agendas too, and their news outlets had agendas too, and it was less visible. Agendas are now more visible. But so you have to — you, I'm talking to you, the listener — you have to, I have to, Tara has to, we all have to develop our critical thinking and be more demanding about our sources of information. That's what needs to happen in the gap, because yes, amazing to have this widening space for other voices, but that's all other voices.

TT: Yeah, it's allll....

SD: It's allll...

TT: ...allll y'allll... (laughs)

SD: ...alllll y'allllll! (laughs) And I want to hear what you have to say. And I want to use my critical abilities to sort through what I hear you saying, to come to what I think is true, and what I think is right, and correct, which are two different things, and wise — what I think is the best course of action for myself, my family, my community, my country, my world. That's it. That is the assignment. You know, if you don't want to trust big media, whatever that is, if you don't want to give big media your money, if you don't want to, you know, just take received ideas, great. You're already on a path where you could. The next step could be critical thinking. But you can't just leave it at: I don't trust you, and I don't trust you. And I saw this thing on YouTube. No, ma'am!

(both laugh)

SD: We're not doing that!

(both laugh)

TT: Dear my dad!

(both laugh)

SD: Attention older people, and younger people. I mean, this is across the board, right?

TT: Totally.

SD: This is across the board. So that's the challenge right now. That's the work, it's like: wake up, wake up. Wake up and pay attention and think. That's it. It's not hard, you can do it, everyone can do this.

TT: Yeah. I also think it's so much harder to get a toehold and be a career journalist, so you can't even find a voice to trust. Because someone says to me, "Well, why don't you want to see this?" It's like, "Well, Stephanie Zacharek at Time said it was shitty." And I trust her. She's been reviewing films for twenty years. You know what I mean? Or it's like, I mean, that's criticism. That's different. But in terms of... it's also because people are cranking out so much content, it's so much harder to develop a style and be a voice that people want to read. There are also no papers and no columnists...

SD: There's nowhere to do it.

TT: Yeah...

SD: Yeah, that's right.

TT: So it's harder to even — you do need faces to put on things.

SD: Yeah. Well, you know, that's a great point, that as a reader, as a consumer of news, you had a relationship with your... I grew up in southern Ontario in the 70s and the 80s, but in the 70s we had the Toronto Star, The Toronto Sun, The Globe and Mail, the Mississauga News. Every community, every suburban community had its own little newspaper. Some neighbourhoods probably had something akin to a newspaper. We had the CBC. We had, you know, a ton of local television news stations, radio stations. There was a lot to choose from. And you picked your paper, we were a Toronto Star family, and I read every word in that newspaper. My dad read the whole paper, so I read the whole

paper. So I had a relationship with that newspaper. I got to know those columnists through their voice, and I knew who I agreed with and who I didn't agree with. And I read them both because that's how you do news. You know, as a reader. But it's true. You knew — Oh yes, I agree with Peter — what's his name? Stark. I think I agree with his music reviews often. We like the same thing. Yeah. So if he's telling me that this new record is good, I'm probably going to like it. So I'm going to check it out, and that kind of thing that you're talking about, that is much harder now. That is much harder now.

And then it goes — it's beyond entertainment and criticism, too, and it is to news because... I think they still teach objectivity in journalism school, which, I love journalism schools. Fill your boots, be real with your students about what the industry is, and I hope that they are being real with them. But maybe, maybe the thing we could stop doing, is saying that reporters can be objective. Of course they cannot. Of course they cannot. You know? I just wrote a little book for Nimbus with my friend Penelope Jackson, where we wrote a little — it's called *Amazing Atlantic Canadian Women*, and it's for middle grade readers, and it's short profiles of 74 women from around Atlantic Canada.

TT: Wow.

SD: Yeah, it was an incredible project. And one of the women we profile in that is Maureen GooGoo, who runs Ku'ku'kwes News. She is a Mi'kmaw reporter. She was at CBC for a while. She's been everywhere, she was at APTN. She's an incredible reporter. And when I was researching her, there was an interview where she talked about how she would pitch a story or want to cover a story that was of interest to other Mi'kmaw people or Indigenous people. And her white editors were like, Well, you can't be objective about it. And the idea that a white reporter is being more objective about it is like, just because you're part of the dominant paradigm, you don't see objectivity, right? I'm also reading *Invisible Woman* by this writer from the UK. Caroline Criado-Perez, I think. And she's writing about how women's bodies and women's experiences are invisible in design. And that's why when you get in a car and put on your seatbelt, it tries to cut your head off, if you're a woman, because it can't cope with your breast.

TT: Right, right, right.

SD: Because we were just never considered. We're just never considered. And when you're the dominant paradigm, you just have no idea, you know, that...

TT: You don't know what you don't know.

SD: Ha! You have no idea that you are also into identity politics. It's just that your identity is so overarching that you can't see it anymore.

TT: And by the way, when all that shit with the fishery was going on, everyone was trying to get Maureen on their team.

SD: Correct. Maureen knows what time it is.

TT: Yeah!

SD: You know? And so like that whole objectivity, this idea of objectivity is, was, useful back in the day — the day we're still in, OK, fine, like the white supremacist patriarchy. But let's let that fall away a little bit more. And let's, again, we can see now, we can see a little

bit the corner of the systems that we've been living under. Many other people have been able to see them in much clearer focus for a longer time because they've been on the edges of it. They've been marginalized by it. But for the rest of us, now we can see. So let's start to pull apart some of these ideas. And again, you'll need one of my best friends: critical thinking! Available to be your best friend as well.

TT: For free.

SD: Absolutely!

TT: Right now.

SD: At your fingertips.

TT: Call now.

SD: Hah hah!

TT: BOGO. Buy one get one.

SD: Buy one get one. Haha! (both laugh)

TT: All right, let's flip. I can tell you (unintelligible) forever, but we don't have that kind of time. Your whole lineup kicks off tonight. So give me an overview. It's all online.

SD: It is all online.

TT: It's not all free. Some things are ticketed. How do we get those tickets?

SD: So you can go to AfterWords Literary Festival dot com, click on 2021 Festival, and there's links on every event to get your ticket. We're really happy to be presenting our shows, using Side Door, an amazing local company.

TT: Big fan.

SD: Oh my gosh, we love Side Door. So yeah, everything is happening on Zoom. Workshops for days, all kinds of workshops. Sarah Mian is teaching a workshop on structure. Casey Plett is teaching a workshop on writing with the door closed and editing with the door open, which I'm so excited about. Andre Fenton is teaching, Pauline Dakin is teaching. Michelle Good is teaching. We're really stoked about our workshop schedule this year, and the workshops are always so great. And then tonight, so it's Truth and Reconciliation Day in Canada. And Rebecca Thomas is going to kick off our programming. We've commissioned her to write a new poem...

TT: Amazing.

SD: ...marking the day, so she will be doing that this evening. And I really could not be more excited. And then Katherena Vermette will be in conversation with Janet Rogers, which is going to be amazing. Katherena is an incredible Métis writer and poet from out west, and she's got a new book called *The Strangers*, and Janet Rogers —an incredible Indigenous poet — and they know each other, and they're super keen to talk to each other, so they'll be in conversation tonight. And then...

TT: I see you've got a little chat coming up.

SD: I am going to talk to Ann-Marie MacDonald. Honestly don't quite know how this happened, but the Writers Federation of Nova Scotia was talking to Ann-Marie about doing an event that would recognize that it's 25 years since her debut novel, *Fall on Your Knees* was released. I can't believe it's been that long. And the Writers Federation came to us and said, Hey, do you want to work on this? And B.T. Dubs? How would you like to do the interview? And I was like...

TT: Me, me, me, me!

SD: Yeah! So I re-read *Fall on Your Knees* in preparation for tonight, and it is blowing my mind more now than it blew my mind, and it seriously blew my mind 25 years ago.

TT: Have you heard? Now I heard a rumour. Yeah, I know it was a rumour. Should I say it? Who cares? That Hannah Moskovitch is working on a Broadway adaptation, or at least a theatrical...

SD: I would not be surprised.

TT: ...I don't want to slap Broadway on something that's not on Broadway, but like a big-time theatrical adaptation of *Fall on Your Knees*.

SD: I would not be surprised. And of course, music is a thick cable running through that story. So, oh my gosh, if that is a true rumour. What do they say on Twitter? "Huge if true."

TT: HUGE if true!

SD: Huge, if true!

TT: Yeah.

SD: I hope it's true. So yeah, so I'm talking to Ann-Marie MacDonald.

TT: No big deal. Heh.

SD: Hold me, hold me. I mean, the thing with the festival is that it's just a series of dreams come true.

TT: Sure.

SD: Like every night is that, you know — having Lawrence Hill and Evelyn White in conversation. Like, are you kidding? That happened? Amazing. And then tomorrow night, we have Giller Prize-winning short story writer Souvankham Thammavongsa in conversation with Oubah Osman, who's a young Somali poet who's living in Ontario, and Souvankham requested Oubah as her interviewer, which is something we really kind of focussed on this year, was like — if we couldn't think of a natural pairing, why don't we ask this writer who'd they'd really love to be in conversation with? We put that out to Francesca Ekwuyasi, and she chose Lee-Anne Poole, so they'll be in conversation together...

TT: It's gonna be a banger.

SD: ...on Sunday, which is going to be incredible. Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh, we haven't even talked about Shelagh Rogers...

TT: No.

SD: ...of CBC, who is going to be interviewing Mark Critch about his new book.

TT: Sure.

SD: Oh my gosh.

TT: Mark Critch is so funny.

SD: This is going to be — yeah, that's Saturday.

TT: They're all bangers. Bangers on bangers.

SD: Bangers on bangers. That's our — that's really our unofficial motto.

TT: And Sheila Heti!

SD: We say “Where writers and readers meet,” but really, it's “Bangers on Bangers.”

TT: Yeah.

SD: And then Sheila Heti in conversation with Avni Doshi.

TT: Sure.

SD: I mean, come on! Plus our first ever YA programming with Chad Lucas and Tom Ryan and Vicki Grant and Wanda Lauren Taylor, and Nova Scotian writers Genevieve Graham and Annick MacAskill and Leslie Crewe and Rebecca Silver Slater. I mean, these are some of my top, top people of all time.

TT: Well, I'm so, so happy that you got to pull it out, and I hope that you can put it in a room next year.

SD: That's the hope.

TT: You know, here from delayed Phase 5. We'll see. But best of luck, and it is so nice to chitchat with you and get you to come from being like, the first, the first mentor-editor-boss I ever had. And now you're on MY SHOW!! Take THAT everyone!!!

SD: Couldn't happen to a nicer guy!

(both laugh)

TT: Thanks so much, Steph.

SD: Thank you Tara.

TT: Take care.

Music outro

The Tideline is engineered by Palmer Jamieson at the Golden Palm, and produced by the Halifax Examiner.

Transcript copyright Halifax Examiner. All rights reserved.