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Books & Ideas: Catherine Bush and Saleema Nawaz in Conversation

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Saleema Nawaz: It's so nice to be here with you, Catherine, and with everybody watching and listening at home. So, we have a bunch of questions for each other about our books, and I'm just gonna like jump right in because I have a question, if that's okay. So, I was wondering where this book started for you. The remote island where it unfolds is so beautifully eloped that at first I thought it might have emerged from the setting, but then I was sort of reading a little bit more about the book after I read it and learned that Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, was a kind of template for it in a way, as well, so I wondered if it started with that or with the urgency of climate change, which is a topic it deals with, or was it something else entirely? So, please, I'd love to hear more about it.

Catherine Bush: Thank you. Thanks for that great opening question, Saleema, and I just wanted to, you know, echo the pleasure of being here with you and with everybody else and having this conversation because I'm a huge fan of your work and your novel, too. I look forward to talking about these two novels together. So, yeah, *Blaze Island* actually began with a production of *The Tempest* that I saw in England at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and it haunted me and pressed itself against me partly because it was set on an Arctic island, and it felt so strange to go all the way to England to see a production of *The Tempest* set in the Arctic that I couldn't get it out of my head. I love northern landscapes. I mean, some people dream about Caribbean islands and I dream about, you know, wind and ice and the cold, and the other thing that struck me about that production was Patrick Stewart as Prospero and he, you know, he played the magician, Prospero, as a virile, powerful figure who didn't want to give up his power, and you know, he can also manipulate the weather and, you know, control the whole environment of this island, and there was just a moment where he kind of transformed for me into a contemporary climate scientist who was, you know, grieving and upset about, you know, the loss of habitat and the melting of Arctic ice and tantalized by the possibility of climate engineering and particularly solar radiation management, which is this plan and research to propel like small particles into the upper atmosphere to create a kind of haze that would limit global heating. It doesn't really address the rise of greenhouse gas so it's sort of a stopgap measure, and it seems sort of fantastical but is actual science based on, you know, and I drew a lot on the science of an actual Canadian scientist, David Keith, and so those were starting points. Also, I mean, for a long

time I had been very, you know, compelled and, you know, thought a lot about ecological loss. It was there in my first novel, *Minus Time*, you know, in which the narrator is a young woman whose mother is an astronaut and she gets involved with a group of animal rights activists, ecoactivists on earth, so it's been there, you know, my attention to the natural world, my, like, you know, intimate relationship with it for a long time and sort of, yeah, obsessed me as a writer and comes back in this book and particularly I just, I felt like I needed to address climate change somehow in a novel and do it not in a dystopic apocalyptic way but in a realistic way, like how do we experience now, yeah, you know, but I needed an island, you know, and that's where I, you know, had to find an island, and I stumbled upon Fogo Island, and as soon as I was there I just thought, okay, this is the island, you know, where I need to set my novel, and I went to a writer's residency program in Tilting on the far edge of the island by the Atlantic, and one of their residency houses is just this little house on a cove and as soon as I walked in the door I thought this is where my characters need to live, and I kept going back over eight years to inhabit this world and, you know, the wind and the landscape of it, so, you know, that's, that's, you know, sort of a summary of all the things that came together to create *Blaze Island*, but I wanna turn, you know, the question back to you and, you know, the inspirations for *Songs of the End of the World* because, as I told you earlier, I read this novel on the early days of the pandemic, and I was doing a lot of reading in lockdown, but this was, you know, the only novel I read that didn't make me feel like it was tossed out of some fantastic space. You create this pandemic world so realistically, so credibly and create it through this web of interconnected characters, so I had this feeling of, you know, intense realism but the uncanny at the same time, but I want to know what were the seeds of this novel and was it characters or were there specific images that came to you, so if you could talk about that.

Saleema Nawaz:

Sure, yeah. Well, I guess for me it did sort of begin with the web and the idea of creating a web between some characters and scenarios and stories that I had already, and I wanted to bring them together into a book because I had characters I just wasn't finished with yet, and so the first sort of seeds of the book began in late 2012. I was trying to come up with a way to connect them all and like a device that would connect them, which is sort of how I came to the idea of a global event that would bring them together and would, you know, test them in different ways, and that was one of the most fun parts of coming up with the idea for the book was like, oh, well, how could this, you know, musician that, you know, I never imaged was, like, could she be the same person as this little girl that I had previously written a story about a little girl on a boat like years earlier, and I was like maybe that is the same person, you know, and kind of making them the same person and likewise doing that, imagining somehow all of these worlds colliding, either directly or indirectly, and that was great fun in terms of the actual writing of a book that would bring together separate characters who weren't originally imagined together, which proved to be

Catherine Bush:

like very challenging. So, as much fun as it is to like draw these lines between, you know, different imaginary worlds you've created, I don't recommend it for any writers out there because it turned out to be quite laborious to kind of weave them together, but it was a sort of fun, interesting thing to do, and one of the first characters who kind of emerged from this idea of bringing them together was the character of Owen, a writer who writes a pandemic novel. So I had sort of settled on the notion of a pandemic as something that connects characters and then, yeah, a writer who writes a book who seems like it's starting to come true, so that was where I started with that. Now, I'm going to turn to another question for you, if that's okay. I want to go back to what you said about *The Tempest*. So, were you actually in, while you were in the play, thinking about like watching Patrick Stewart and seeing him as a climate scientist? No, it actually, it came afterwards, and I wish I could remember, you know, the moment where I actually had that idea, you know. I have remnants, I, you know, of the way things came together. I mean, I do know that for months afterwards, no, years afterwards, I guess, I was thinking about that, and then my sister is a climate science adviser, Elizabeth Bush, and she works for the federal government and, you know, because it's her job and because I'm interested in the climate crisis and how people respond to it, you know, we would talk about it, and she goes to a lot of international climate panels, and I'm interested again in the, you know, all the morally ambivalent areas or also the emotionally charged areas and how people who have a lot of knowledge about the climate crisis hold, you know, grief and anger and fear, so, you know, so I was carrying all that and then, I don't know, there was a moment where it all, it all came together, and I can't remember that, but I do know it was also really important to bring Miranda forward as a character, you know, this young woman and what her experience of change on this island was. I mean, that seemed really important to me. I'm just thinking listening to you, you know, that you worked on this novel from 2012 onwards, and I first started thinking about *Blaze Island* around the same time, and, you know, so we were working on these projects simultaneously, and what's also interesting to me is that, you know, they occur in very similar timeframes because, you know, yours backtracks to, you know, 1999, but most of it's set between 2000 and 2020 and, you know, the end of 2020 when we are right now, and *Blaze Island* is set between basically between 2009 and, you know, and 2019, and, again, to just stick with a kind of realistic, you know, mode of telling and not go too far into the dystopic and the, you know, the dystopic and the apocalyptic. Did you ever consider that when thinking about a pandemic novel? Did you read other pandemic novels, or if you could just talk a little more about, you know, how you imagined your way into a pandemic.

Saleema Nawaz:

Yeah, well, I think the, just because at the very beginning I was interested in, you know, sort of when I settled on a pandemic and deciding that was something I was going to use as a device, I was thinking about other Hollywood depictions of pandemics and those sorts of dystopian

narratives and thinking about like what they tell us about ourselves and about the world and the way that fiction can have an influence on us, you know, the way that we kind of like take stories on and use them to help navigate our way in the world, and so I was interested in this idea of a writer who was writing a book about a pandemic and having a pandemic in the real world of the novel and how his version of it could be influencing people in the world of the novel or how people in a pandemic could be influenced by, you know, this Hollywood idea of like, you know, every person for themselves or, like, you know, there's gonna be roving groups of cannibals on the streets or, you know, whatever it is that kind of like survivalist narrative of like everybody's got to barricade themselves in their house with a gun or whatever and just thinking about the kind of the danger of telling stories like that, like what they tell us about our own nature and kind of wanting to write against it, or at least sort of problematize it in some way. I didn't actually read too much pandemic literature or plague literature while I was writing because I was a little bit, I had some anxiety of the influence a little bit, but I was wondering, you know, going back to using *The Tempest* as an inspiration, and I should just say it's, I don't know how I managed to get through university without ever reading *The Tempest*, but I never did until now, and it's so possible to read *Blaze Island* without having read *The Tempest* and really enjoy it on its own terms, and I can say that as someone who had not read it ahead of time, but was that a useful kind of template to have, or in what ways was it helpful or in what ways did you kind of play with that? What was it like working with Shakespeare in your novel?

Catherine Bush:

Yeah, I mean, I'm glad first of all that you read it without having read *The Tempest* because I, too, really wanna say it doesn't matter to me if people have read *The Tempest*, you know, when they read *Blaze Island*, and, obviously, if you're working with, you know, a prior text of some point, it's also essential for the novel to stand on its own terms, and so it's, you know, totally gratifying to hear you say that. I mean, it absolutely has to create its own world, but I knew that I was walking into a literary world of, you know, other people who have rewritten Shakespeare. You know, there's Hamlet, the, what is it, the story of Edgar Sawtelle, and, you know, there's, the one that was closest to my heart, actually, is Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* in which she retells *The Winter's Tale*, and it's contemporary and follows the story quite closely. It has a sort of edge of the fairytale, and totally I wanted to bring together something that felt, a world that felt quite realistic but also had this, you know, seductive tale-ish quality, too, because especially when you're writing about something like the climate crisis, and a lot of people, you know, may find the prospect of that kind of depressing, but I wanted that, the seductive quality of a tale to pull people in, and so there are various people who have rewritten *The Tempest*, you know, the Caribbean playwright, Aime Cesaire, you know, the British writer, Marina Warner, so I, you know, I was aware of some of those, and I've read some of those, but I also, you know, was just thinking, okay, what can I do, and I really wanted to bring, you know, some of the

women back from the dead like the Caliban character, Caleb, whose mother becomes Sylvia, who is kind of an herbalist who lives on the island, lives very close to the land, has a lot of folk knowledge about weather and the land itself. She forages and lives in that way, and to make her a kind of, yeah, like an oppositional character for Milan Wells, who is the climate scientist, and Miranda, Alan/Milan, he has two names, his daughter, Miranda, her mother, Jenny, who is a painter is present in the early parts of the novel, and the loss of Jenny kind of permeates both Miranda's life and Milan, who changes his name to Alan when he comes to the island, his life, also, and I really wanted to bring forward the younger characters, Miranda herself, give her a lot of agency, and Frank who is a young man who washes up on her doorstep in the middle of a huge hurricane, and that, you know, I very much took from *The Tempest*, which opens in a huge storm, so, of course, the novel had to open in a, what I made into a, you know, a category 5 hurricane but instead of, you know, the magician creating the hurricane, really humans, you know, have interfered with the, you know, the climate in such a way to create these huge weather events, so I had fun, you know, playing with it and making a comic foil out of a climate denier, but, you know, so this was, this all sort of propelled my process and, yeah, you know, also telling the story in a really tight timeline was super interesting to me. One of the things, you know, again when I think about our two novels together, as I was just saying, you know, there's the younger characters in *Blaze Island*, and there's a lot of parent-child relationships in my novel, and I really thought about this reading *Songs*, also, and, you know, there are a lot of babies in your novel, you know, a lot of young women, or not just young women, women having babies and not always in traditional ways, sperm donors and absent partners and making nontraditional families, but, you know, in your pandemic world, or just in your world, fictional world more generally, one of the central concerns really seems to be, you know, what does it mean to have a child now, you know, how do we parent at this present moment, how do we create families, and I'd love to hear you talk about that.

Saleema Nawaz: Yeah, I think it was a personal anxiety that made its way into the novel. You know, in all of the years I was working on it I was, you know, sort of, you know, thinking of having kids, you know, getting pregnant, being pregnant, having a small child, and also, you know, researching pandemics quite closely, that's, you know, what I would be doing in my spare time when she was asleep. I would be, you know, reading everything about the Ebola outbreaks, you know, and it just, it was very anxiety provoking and, I mean, even before having a kid it was something I think I've been preoccupied with for a very long time since even my first book, *Mother Superior*, because, you know, there are these very worrisome situations in the world and, you know, with climate change especially, you know, like every day that goes by I feel like these concerns are more at the forefront of my mind and so certainly, yeah, that anxiety is, the whole book I think is infused with that, and then the other thing you mentioned about the unconventional families was something I wanted to

highlight, and I kind of wanted to deprivilege this notion of just blood families, you know. There are so many different types of families and so many different types of care and, you know, friend relationships or adoption or stepparent/stepchild relationships, and so I wanted to put all of those in there and also to think about, because so much of the novel is about connection and, you know, if your child is the child of a sperm donor, you know, anybody could be that child's father, you don't necessarily know, and so, you know, we are all connected in all these ways that we both know and we don't know, so that was something I wanted to put in the book. It's hard to have a conversation like this because I keep wanting to follow up on everything you say, but then I'm like, okay, I've gotta pivot, pivot back to my question. So, there's, thinking about connection and the ways that we're connected, there's one thing I love in Blaze Island is the connection to the natural world, like not just between people, and even though those relationships are very beautifully portrayed, you know, especially the family relationship, Miranda's relationship with her mother and father and with Caleb, but also with the natural world, so there's moments in the book I kept noticing and highlighting where the sense of self becomes quite porous, you know, and the line between humans and the natural world becomes blurred, and the character of Caleb in particular, you know, he sometimes sees from the perspective of animals, but Milan, too, he, you know, he talks about walking, you know, going for walks until his sense of self disappears into the rocks and the air, and Miranda, too, sometimes, you know, she talks to plants and we just see, we also see this process of her growing up on the island and kind of just becoming more in tune with it and learning how to live off of it, so I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about that.

Catherine Bush:
Yeah, I mean, the human relationships are definitely important in, you know, in the novel, and those parent-child relationships, but I'm so glad you also brought forward the relationships to the natural world because it is really essential to how I think about the novel and trying while, you know, making these, the parent-child relationships fraught and filled with emotion and, you know, the young adult children holding their own grief and anger about the things that their parents have failed to do in relation to, you know, the climate or to make a safe world for them but they're also, you know, living in this intensely natural world, and I wanted to bring all of those natural elements forward so that the human story is kind of embedded. You know, you've created this web of human connection and I'm trying to create this web in which there's human connection but all this more than human connection, as well, and so, yes, Milan walks into the, you know, the barrens and loses himself, his sense of self, and, you know, Caleb, Caleb's mind at moments of trauma, he flies up into a seagull's body or a hawk's or a fox's on the ground, and Miranda is deeply connected to wind and air and is always attuned, you know, to shifts in the wind, which was something I really learned being on Fogo Island, you know, where one of the people who I met there just, you know, said wind decides everything, and I really wanted all of those nonhuman presences,

including the wind, to become a character, a presence, practically a body in the novel. This is the point where I'm gonna do a short reading, and then maybe you can read something after this because we were trying to include readings at some point, so this is from a scene between Frank, who is the stranger who has arrived at Miranda's doorstep in the storm, claiming to be a birder, but he's a strange birder and he asks a lot of questions that don't really seem like birding questions, and so this is a scene, a short scene, between Frank and Miranda. "Are you part of a government weather network?" Frank asked, still peering across the fields. "No." Miranda spoke quickly. They weren't, as far as she knew. She was pretty sure her father kept his activities to himself. "It's just for us or anyone around here who's interested in the weather." Oh, and I should say that they're looking at the weather monitors in the field beyond Miranda's house. "What do you monitor exactly? Wind speed, wind direction, air pressure, temperature, humidity, precipitation at ground level, solar radiation?" At this, Frank gave her a stare. "Solar radiation?" "Amounts of sunlight. So, are you noticing a lot of changes over time?" "Some," Miranda said. She didn't really want to face more questions about her father and what he was up to. There was the past, his past, which he'd ordered her to keep hidden when his speaking out about the dangers of the world's warming weather had overturned their lives, but there were mysteries in the present, as well. "Is your [inaudible] meteorologist [inaudible] wind swept over her out of the southwest, batting her face, ruffling her ears, a soft wind, but one that nevertheless had force. She tried to concentrate, let it flow through her, around her, allowing Frank's troublesome questions to fall away. She did not wish to talk about her father. She really didn't. The wind was always there. She lived in a world made of wind. Wind was her father, mother, sister, brother. Wind was changeable, yet a wind like this and its constancy steadied her. She held out her arms. Frank's voice broke through again. "Miranda, are you okay?" "The wind's checking off. It's moved back into the southwest. That's our prevailing wind. The air is full of currents like the sea. When you close your eyes, it's easier to fell them." Frank grew quiet. When Miranda couldn't stand it any longer, she opened her eyes to find him at her side, eyes closed. "I'm not very good at this," he said. "I'm afraid to admit I have absolutely no idea what direction the wind is coming from." "It teases you. It swirls, but mostly it's pushing at your left cheek. Can you feel that?" She was close enough that she might have reached out to touch his smooth skin with her finger, sunlight making flecks on the barest hint of stubble. "What I feel is a lot of air moving about" Frank said. "I suppose I need practice, don't I? Miranda, will you teach me more about the wind?" An Arctic tern flew past, swift and winged, a tiny air moustache preparing for its long autumn flight south to the very bottom of the world, but Frank had his eyes closed and anyway the tern wasn't an accidental, only a migrant. "A south wind arrives here over water, cold in the spring and then warmer. A west wind comes over land. A north wind's a cold wind, winds that head east and then bring rain. Never go fishing in a wind

with east in it. Fish in a north wind because it blows towards the land," Miranda said. "Never go fishing in a wind with east in it. Okay. Got that." Frank grinned. When a pair of goldfinches swooped past chirping, he startled, but Miranda told him goldfinches weren't so unusual anymore. Though they never used to come to the island, there had been more in recent years. Their rain shifting north as the weather warmed. Silently they stood there, eyes closed, as the smell of sun-warmed moss and lichen and the salt brine of the sea rose around them. The wind was agile and tender and calming. A gull called while the shadow of a cloud passing overhead was a small dark break of coolness. So, there's some wind for you.

Saleema Nawaz:

Oh, that was wonderful. I felt transported. Absolutely. The wind is such, is a character in your novel. I love rugged landscapes, too, and it was so, it was so easy to picture myself on an island off the coast of Newfoundland. Your passage reminded me of a question I'd had when I was reading. You know, the detail about the goldfinches, seeing more and more of them. I just wanted to get into the question of research. Little details like that. I was always wondering like, oh, is that true, is that a detail that she's picked up or is it invented, you know, as something that could very plausibly happen in the near future, and something you alluded to before about the technology of climate engineering that's something that comes up in the book, and I was wondering if some of the ideas that the characters discuss, like launching the nanoparticles into the air, are those current areas of researched like technology that's in development? Is that happening now, or what is the state of that? Could you talk about that a bit?

Catherine Bush:

Yeah, you know, both our novels required a great deal of research and, you know, and the speculation, and, you know, I just wanna say, also, how much I appreciated all the, you know, the small details. I mean, your goldfinches might be, I don't know, the masks which, you know, when you were writing were not so much a part of life as they are now for all of us, but, yes, you know, my research involved both speaking to people on Fogo Island and just asking them about weather changes, you know, how is the wind different, and things like the arrival of goldfinches or bigger crowds of robins, so a lot of that was experiential research that went into a notebook, and then, you know, the climate engineering is real science, and a Canadian scientist, David Keith, who is now at Harvard, is very much in the forefront of solar radiation management research, and I drew on his work quite a lot. There haven't been any field experiments, and it is really contentious, as is described in the novel, because, you know, there's only one atmosphere, and putting anything into it is, you know, extremely, you know, potentially alarming, and so I wanted to bring all that, you know, moral debate into the novel, so it's, you know, it's a real climate debate, you know, and it has the aura of the fantastical, but scientists like Keith, you know, think of it in terms of, you know, what we might have to do a stopgap measure, but I'm interested in the mindset of like what makes a scientist contemplate something like that even though

it's really, you know, morally fraught, and, you know, in my scientist, Milan, who is trying desperately to, you know, save his daughter in some way or create a safe world for her and while he's watching, you know, the Arctic melt and, you know, ice shelves collapse, and, you know, that's his field, so it's, you know, it's a very personal loss. So, I'm gonna pivot and ask you, you know, one of the, you know, we've, you've talked a bit about your research, but, you know, one of the other things that, one of the strands that goes through your novel, it seems to me, is a real interest in change and how characters experience change and, you know, the younger characters are studying Heraclitus in a philosophy class at university and we can never step in the same river twice, and a lot of characters throughout the novel talk about how they experience change, catastrophic change, personal change, and that word change, you know, when I most recently read your novel just kept resonating for me, so I wondered if you could talk about that, and I don't know where you're reading will fit in, but I hope you will read a little bit for us, too. Don't forget.

Saleema Nawaz:

Thank you, Catherine. You're the master of the segue way, so may I can tie change into my reading. Yeah, that, I mean, that was something I was thinking about a lot from a sort of very what does the character decide in this chapter, like, you know, what is at stake for them, are they making a decision that's going to potentially change their lives, and, sorry, I can see my internet connection is unstable. I hope I'm not really freezing a lot. So, I was thinking about, you know, I was thinking about that on a sort of chapter by chapter level of, you know, characters facing decisions and what are they going through but then also in terms of, you know, the idea that this novel is kind of a hopeful novel and I think if you, if you are writing a hopeful novel you have to kind of reckon with the idea of whether people can change for the better and if that is something that people are capable of, and I think that believing in change and positive change is a part of having kind of like a hopeful outlook on the world, and that was something I had to kind of reckon with in myself, you know. It's like, well, what, like, is this hopeful attitude justified, like, you know, is your faith in the world misplaced and if not then you have to believe that people can change for the better, so that was something I had the characters face, and I will try to pivot to my reading here. I just have to pull it up here. Yeah, so, I'm gonna read a little bit from a section of the first half of the novel. It's from the perspective of the character named Sarah who is one of the characters who changes quite a bit. She works for a publishing company in New York and she's been told that her job is going to be eliminated unless she can somehow get in touch with this writer named Owen Grant, who has stopped answering the phone for his publicist. He's written a novel about a pandemic, as I mentioned, called How to Avoid the Plague, and it almost seems as if it's coming true in the world of the novel with a virus called ARAMIS. Sarah has volunteered partially to try to get ahold of him personally because she used to vaguely know him years earlier when he was the visiting writer at her university. The other detail to know is that Sarah has previously suffered a lot from anxiety, so sort of taking this step

is a big one. She has talked to him on the phone and he sort of turned her down and so now she's sort of going to his house. On Monday morning, Sarah called the office for the mailing address they had on file for Owen Grant then grabbed her purse and caught the train out to Bushwick. Owen's address brought her to a slim modern building in gray and white. She stepped into an entryway with floor to ceiling windows and dialed the apartment number she had written down in her notebook. "Yes?" "Mr. Grant, it's Sarah Bailey from Chilale Press. Can you buzz me up? I'd like to talk to you in person about the publicity plan. I've worked out a proposal for the next few weeks." "Sarah," he said, "I'm sorry, but as I mentioned the other night, I'm too busy to do any promotion right now." "It won't be time consuming or onerous in any way. We can be strategic." "Strategic," he repeated. "Yes, that's right. I'm being strategic about what's really important." Sarah had counted on seeing him face to face within a fair amount of firing distance and now she'd forgotten everything she'd planned to say. All she wanted was to delay any finality of a refusal. She noticed a camera mounted in an upper corner of the lobby. "Can you see me? Do you have a screen?" "I can see you." She glanced up at the camera and waved, then she addressed it directly. "Look, can I get you anything while I'm here?" There was a moment of silence. "I wouldn't mind a coffee." He seemed to hesitate. "A cappuccino. There's a place around the corner." Jolted by the promise of success, she raced down the street and spotted the café, slipping ahead of two people hovering in the door. While she waited in line, she smoothed her hair and double checked that her voice recorder app was working. She was back in Owen's entryway within 10 minutes. "One cappuccino coming up," she said when he answered. She had a hand on the inner door, ready to pull it open when he buzzed her inside. "Great." Owen sounded distant. "You can leave it there on the table." Sarah's hand dropped from the door. Her pulse thundering in her ears, she stepped over to a narrow table and set the cup down next to a vase holding a bouquet of convincing fake orchids. She turned to make one more plea to the camera. "Please, Owen, Mr. Grant. I just wanna help. Please. Please call me if you change your mind." "Thank you for coming, Sarah," he said. "I appreciate it, but don't come back." The casual authority of his tone spurred her natural defiance as she stalked out of the building. No, she wouldn't come back, but neither would she leave. Retreating to a bench a few paces down the sidewalk, Sarah pulled out from her bag a magazine emblazed with the now ubiquitous ARAMIS girl photo and in an all too earnest impersonation of a bad private eye kept watch on the lobby from behind it. If nothing else, it would be a story to make her brother Elliott laugh, probably while he loaded her things into a rental van and tried in his laconic way to convince her that moving back in with their parents was not a defeat or even a disappointment but merely sensible planning on the part of any single mom who wanted the best for her son. Fifteen minutes later, a man emerged from the elevator garbed in a floor length hooded rain slicker, gloves, and a face mask, though not, Sarah noted, one of the promotional

sets from Chilale Press. In spite of all the gear, she recognized him at once. Head lowered, Owen pushed open the inner door, claimed the coffee in one thickly gloved hand, and was back through the elevator doors just in time to be swallowed up by them. Sarah was stunned. Owen no longer seemed like a celebrity jealous of his privacy or an artist too consumed by his craft for the trifling racket of pedaling books. He seemed like a man who was mentally ill. She remained on the bench for the duration of the day, puzzling about Owen and flipping through his novel. There was an outside possibility he knew she was still waiting for him, that the slicker costume had been nothing but an act to make her go away. He could be watching her even now if his windows faced front, but somehow, she didn't think it was an act. Sarah imagined him inside, bleaching his shoes, pouring his coffee into a clean cup, looking up infection data, possibly writing if he wasn't too bonkers, and if he really was as afraid as he seemed, she felt for him. She knew what it meant to be paralyzed by doubt and indecision and the terror that could lead a person to seek refuge indoors. It wasn't until she noticed the bustle of impending rush hour that she rose from the bench with a strange feeling of accomplishment simply from not having given up. She buzzed Owen's apartment again. This time it took him longer to pick up. "You're back." He sounded tired and possibly, as Sarah dared to hope, resigned. "I never left." It was starting to feel natural talking to him through the intercom. "You're frightened," she said. "That's why you won't see me. You're scared to leave your house." "What?" said Owen. "No, look. I did a lot of research for the book. You might say it made me paranoid enough to assume things will get worse before they get better." "So, you're not afraid, you're careful." "Exactly." There was a pause. "It doesn't help that everything that happened in my novel seems to be coming true. You know, the virus from China, the aerosol transmission, the kids getting sick." "Do you really think things are gonna become as desperate as in the book?" "Sometimes," he said, "sometimes not." I'll stop there.

Catherine Bush:
That's a great place for you to end, you know. It just underscores again how, you know, prophetic the novel feels and, you know, eerily like our current moment, and, yeah, I just, I'd love you just to talk a little bit about how it felt to bring this work into the world at, you know, at the moment of a pandemic and, you know, you've got, I mean, this wonderful meta thing happening of Owen in the novel and so you're writing Owen and then, though you've very much not Owen, you have your own pandemic novel coming out into the world, and can you talk a little bit about that experience?

Saleema Nawaz:
Well, it was definitely very, very eerie and, I don't know, just, I guess, sort of unsettling, but at the same time it was such a, it was such a relief to bring out the novel because there was a period of time where, you know, the publisher was sort of following what was happening and there was a decision to bring out the book early as an e-book, which I was so grateful for because I felt like, you know, in some ways I had written the book, you know, for this moment or ideally for a moment before this moment and so I

was really grateful that it was out there, that I felt like the things that I had to say about this, you know, could kind of be out in the world, but it was definitely like a funny, you know, set of weeks and interactions, you know, thinking about it, going out there and remembering, you know, there was a moment I think in copy editing where, you know, we had a conversation with the editors like, oh, you know, should we keep in the phrase social distancing? Is that gonna be too confusing for people? Will they think that just means how far away we need to stand from one another? Then it was like, no, okay, it's a really, it's the term that's being used and like I wanted it to stay in the book, you know, not having been able, of course, to foresee what was going to happen, but I was thinking about your book and, you know, the importance of, I mean, on some level, you know, fiction is fiction and one isn't necessarily trying to make art, you know, that has a message, but as writers, you know, we have our preoccupations, you know, that we have and, you know, and there's judgements that kind of are included in the stories that we write, and in Blaze Island you depict, I think quite accurately, an often sometimes, you know, with great humor, too, you know this kind of willful blindness and capitalized greed as obstacles to progress on the issue of, you know, decarbonization but also, you know, there's a great sense of human ingenuity in your novel, too, with climate engineering, even though, you know, it is problematized by the ethical issues, but I guess this is a long way of saying that having researched your book and having written it, do you have a sense of what we need to do for the planet to survive? What were some conclusions you came to, or did you come to any, or was it just that it's complicated?

Catherine Bush:

Well, it's complicated, and I think, you know, one of the things that a novel does is that it dramatizes complexity. I mean, that's one of the reasons that I love to go to novels is that they dramatize questions, not answers, and, you know, one of the pleasures of writing Blaze Island was to embody all these different responses to the climate emergency, and, you know, there's Milan wells, the scientist who knows so much and is, you know, overcome with a mixture of grief and, you know, terror and anger, and it's funny I remember reading an article and I think it was Vice, actually, about climate scientists and, you know, and then sort of saying really they should swear a lot more because they are confronting so much, but then, you know, his daughter, Miranda, she and Caleb, who is the, you know, the young man who was her companion growing up on the island, you know, they, they're both in their different ways experiencing change but they don't have the knowledge. They're more like us, you know, when they get the science, Milan's science, sort of sideways and in bits and pieces, which is very much, I think, how many of us experience it, and Miranda lives in her own kind of denial. I mean, she doesn't really wanna think about what her father is up to, and so I see her as sort of an every, every woman in that way, but through Frank and his sudden arrival and his questions, this sort of safe bubble in which she's lived is punctured, and she, like many of us, has wanted to create a future that looks like the past, because that's sort of how we, really, the only way that we can

imagine the future until we have something like a pandemic that ruptures our world and all of a sudden we can't look at the past as a guide to the future.

Saleema Nawaz: I love the way that you talk about the novel as posing more questions because I think that that is part of it, for sure, and, yeah, it gives us a way to imagine our way, our way through some of these crises and to put us in the place of the characters, and, honestly, I don't think I could say it any better than you did. I absolutely agree with everything you said about the provocation to feel.

Catherine Bush: Your novel, too, speaks with, as you've said, with a kind of hope and possibility, which I think it's so important to bring to this moment and an ethics of care, which seems so essential, and, you know, I mean, I hope that *Blaze Island* speaks in a similar way with a sense of care, you know, to the human world and the world beyond the human, also.

Saleema Nawaz: It absolutely does, and I agree it is so essential right now.

Catherine Bush: Yeah, are there any, you know, any last comments that you'd like to make, Saleema?

Saleema Nawaz: Oh, well, just that it's been such a pleasure to talk to you. As you know, I've been a fan of your writing for so many years, and I appreciate your kindness in asking me to do this event with you, and also one time in inviting your mom to attend a reading I did at a library. It was so nice that she was there.

Catherine Bush: I think both our mothers are here tonight, so that's a good thing. You know, I wanna ask you one more question because we have a few more minutes and I'm super, you know, interested, you know, in your pandemic you actually have to kill off a lot of your characters, and I'm just, I'm curious like what that felt like for you as a novelist.

Saleema Nawaz: Well, I mean, I feel like we're often, you know, sort of playing god with our characters, but I did have to be coaxed to make that happen. There was, kind of unbelievably, an early draft work because my novel was originally going to be called *How to Avoid the Plague*, like Owen's novel in the book, and so I was just sort of hoping everyone was going to avoid it. I had little scenarios in which they, you know, I was like it's called *How to Avoid the Plague* why does anybody need to get sick or die, but of course dramatic purposes require and obviously the realism that, you know, that we are both going for required it, so, you know, it was sad, but I also, I love making people crying. I love crying in books, so.

Catherine Bush: Well, in my novel it's mostly the icebergs that die and, you know, the humans are just left with this, you know, have to hold this sense of loss, but, you know, again, I want the icebergs to be characters and they're there and they're melting and they're 10,000 years old and, you know, it's an incredible thing to be in close contact with an iceberg.

Saleema Nawaz: I love the scene of your iceberg. When I went to Newfoundland it was back in the days of disposable cameras and I have an entire roll of film of just being in this boat up close to this iceberg, and I found it very powerful, but it was so poignant to read of this experience in connection with your book and thinking of it as ice that we're losing, and so I had to kind of

Catherine Bush: reframe that past experience of, you know, wonder into one of, you know, mixed with loss, as well.

Yeah, I mean, I'd love to, I think there must be a word in German for, you know, grief beauty or something that brings those two things together, which is what I feel when I'm looking at icebergs, and, yeah, that's as close as I can get is, you know, grief awe or grief beauty, and I'm, you know, I'm glad you love the icebergs in the book, so, yeah, again, and, you know, in both novels there is this, you know, loss and, you know, we do have to confront loss in confronting change, but, you know, your novel, as you say, is also full of hope and the hope of connection between people and new life, and I leave my characters on a precipice of loss and change and a transformed world and who knows quite what will happen to them, but we're all in that place at the moment, I feel, you know, where we don't know what the future is going to look like and in a hopeful way I hope that it won't quite look like the past, you know, and we'll see what new stories, you know, I feel like we're both trying to tell new stories for this new moment and, you know, new stories that draw on the old stories, but it feels so important to tell stories in response to this changing moment, and I'm thrilled to have had a chance to talk to you about yours and the context of both these novels, so thank you so much.

Saleema Nawaz: Oh, thank you. It's been such a pleasure.

Catherine Bush:

Yes, yeah, and thanks to everyone who came out tonight, and I'm glad we got the internet connection back and working. Thanks to Mary for being a wonderful host, and, yes, thanks again, and goodnight to everybody.

Saleema Nawaz:

Bye.