

Koffler Centre of the Arts
Tuesday, November 16, 2021

Vine Awards Panel 1: WWII Fiction & Stories of Survival

Michelle Barker, Gordon Korman, and Carol Windley in conversation with Naomi K. Lewis

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Hello, everybody, and welcome. Congratulations on being shortlisted. I have lots of questions for all of you, but I think I'm going to start with a very general one since this panel is about the second world war and stories of survival. I wanted to ask, I mean, I know, I wrote a book that was also set in the second world war and is a story of a survival, so I kind of, I know I have a feeling of, you know, there are so many books already written about this, asking myself, do I have something new to offer and ultimately deciding that I thought so and obviously all of you have had the same, come to the same conclusion, so I'm just wondering how you decided to write about this era that has, you know, been written about quite a bit and how you decided to come at it from the particular angle that you did, which is quite different in each of your cases. So, I know that's very general, but I'm just going to start there and I will start by asking you, Michelle.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Oh, okay. Well, my mother grew up in Germany during World War II, so it's been a subject that has fascinated me for quite a long time now. I grew up listening to her stories, and it's always been something that I have thought about doing. I have written a couple of other books set in Germany, and basically everything that I write that is German related is inspired by her. She was just a little girl during the second world war, so the book, *My Long List of Impossible Things*, is not her story. It actually started out as her story when I first started writing it, and that was a very bad decision. It just did not, mixing fact and fiction just didn't really work for me. I couldn't make it work. She was only eight or nine years old, and I, the subject matter combined with her age, just, I just couldn't do it, so I had to basically throw out most of the manuscript and start over again and really come at it from a fictional point of view, although the beginning of the novel when the Soviets invade and show up at the home and kick the family out is actually directly from my mother's experience.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Oh, my goodness.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Yeah, with holding up the cookie sheet and everything, that's actually, that's actually what happened, but from then on it veers completely into fiction. You asked about the angle that we chose and whether we thought we had something to offer.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Well, obviously you do have something to offer.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Well, no, but I mean something new, and I guess for me it was the German point of view, number one, which is thin ice to skate on, and then also the end of the second world war when the soviets invaded. I didn't feel that there was a lot out there, particularly for young readers, and so that was another reason why I chose that particular era.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: I think you're right that it is, it is a tough, it's not written about that much probably and it probably is because it feels like, yeah, it's not the Germans' place to say they suffered, too, from the second world war or whatever, although it is in fact the case, right?

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Well, it was tough. That's what made it so hard. It's like, okay, what can I actually say that is not going to offend literally everybody, but at the same time, I did feel that there was, when I looked at my mother's experience, for example, as a 9-year-old girl being kicked out of her home and wandering the streets and having Soviets pointing their guns at her, she was an innocent person in all of this, and she, of course, there were lots of children and women and elderly people, as well, who really were innocent and ended up sort of bearing the brunt of what happened from the, you know, from the Soviets and the other people who were invading, and so I felt like that was, I felt like that was a story that needed to be told, but it was not an easy one to tell for sure.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah, I can absolutely understand that it wouldn't be, and on that note, maybe would you like to give us a short reading now?

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Oh, sure. Yeah. Okay, so you've heard a little bit about what the novel is about. Katja is the main character. She's 16 years old, and so she's kicked out of her home with her sister and her mother, and one of the things that she has to leave behind is her piano and her dreams of being a concert pianist. She had a Jewish piano teacher, and as the details of the Holocaust come to light she has to come to terms with what likely happened to him but also with how much her family knew and didn't know. So, the scene I'm going to read is when she's thinking back to when she first became a student of Herr Goldstein. Lessons with Frau Erdmann were all right - until the afternoon I came to her and said, I want to learn Chopin's Waltz in C-sharp minor. She fussed with her eyeglass chain. That's far too complicated for you, dear. No, I said, it's too complicated for you. She whisked the duet book off the music stand. Go to Solomon Goldstein, then. He's the one who should teach you. Who? No one. She glanced at the walls. Nothing. I went home and told Mutti, I need a new teacher: Solomon Goldstein. Solomon Goldstein, she said, as if the name weighed a hundred kilos. Impossible. Papi said the same. Why? I asked. Have you heard of him? Is he not taking new students? Not Aryan students, Papi said. I doubt he's even allowed to have a musical instrument. What? Why not? I said. He's a piano teacher. Papi changed the subject to cows. There was always a lot to say about the cows - their calves, the quality and quantity of milk, the sales in town. But the idea echoed in my head like the theme in a fugue. All four voices took it up - subject and answer, Solomon Goldstein - until I found out where he lived and showed up at his little house. Impossible, he said, when I introduced myself. I can't teach you. I don't even have a

piano. Both of those things turned out not to be true. The piano was hidden in the cellar where the sound didn't carry. All I had to do was play for him once. Herr Goldstein agreed to teach me if I swore to continue my pretend lessons with Frau Erdmann and not breathe a word of the secret lessons to anyone. Why can't I tell? I asked. He did not talk about cows. I'll get in trouble. What kind of trouble? The kind that involves the SS and the Gestapo. The men in long leather coats who drove big black Mercedes Benzes. People kept their heads down whenever they passed.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Thank you so, Michelle.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Thank you.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Let's move on to Gordon. So, Gordon, same question about how you came to write about this topic, and I know you've written many, many books and this does seem like perhaps a bit of a departure for you in terms of - -

>> GORDON KORMAN: For sure. I mean, I think, you know, I'd been writing kind of adventure series for a while, and, you know, sort of survival kind of shipwreck kids and, you know, break the record for the youngest climber on top of Mt. Everest, and eventually I did one on the Titanic. I wrote a trilogy about kids on the Titanic, and I had never written any kind of historical fiction before and I, I just was totally hooked and I wanted to do it again, and, you know, I didn't have a topic but I just sort of thought, World War II would be perfect, you know. I just thought that it would be, you know, a fascinating topic for me but also a fascinating topic for kids, and that's really what War Stories started out as was originally going to be this World War II trilogy, and I had all kinds of grand plans. I was going to involve, you know, kids fighting through the resistance or, you know, kidnapped nuclear scientists or whatever. I had all kinds of ideas spinning, and it was my editor who kind of grounded me and sort of said, you know, this would be great if you could keep it like a little bit more sort of connected to the experience of kids, and I sort of thought to myself, you know, you always sort of feel with the subject of World War II and kids, you know, particularly kids who grew up with, you know, Marvel movies and kind of superhero movies where every second word you hear in the media is like, you know, the entire future of the world is at stake and, you know, the forces of evil are taking over, and it really sort of stuck out to me that these things were happening for real in the, you know, distant sort of but not that distant past, and so I got this idea that if I wrote about the two timelines, if I wrote about Trevor's story in the present and his great grandfather's story in the second world war, I could sort of play around with the dynamic between, you know, kind of, you know, kind of, not exactly making, not glamourizing the war, but certainly you don't want to in any way minimize the achievement of the people who won World War II. I mean, it really was probably, you know, my first, my first Google search for World War II what popped up was World War II the largest single event in human history, and I was kind of like I didn't even know we had a largest single event, so winning it has got to be the largest single achievement, but at the same time, you know, especially kids who play a lot of video games and glamourize first person shooters and, you know, shoot 'em up kind of games, I thought it was a great chance to sort of tell my World War II story but at the

same time really sort of step through that balance, and that I think is what makes War Stories a little bit different.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Absolutely. Absolutely. Okay, well, I have a million more questions but I will invite you to read.

>> GORDON KORMAN: Okay. Let me just see what we've got here. It's very hard to read on Zoom to get the light right.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Oh, yeah.

>> GORDON KORMAN: The flash came a split second before the explosion. The bakery disintegrated around the soldier, collapsing into dust. At the last instant, he hurled himself out into the street, just as the heavy wooden door frame came down. He was alive-but now he was exposed. He could feel the dozens of German rifle barrels drawing a bead on him. And then – hope. Rattling up the ruined street came the first of the American Shermans, late to the battle but maybe not too late for him. The soldier leaped onto the tank, scrambling up over the tread to a precarious perch on the lumbering vehicle's side. There he hung, holding on with his left arm as he fired blindly at the German positions with his right. One by one, adversaries went down-infantrymen, a machine-gun nest, and-The missile came in with a whistling sound-a shoulder-launched anti-tank shell. He propelled himself free just as the Sherman blew apart in a huge fireball. The explosion launched him forward toward the German line. He hit the ground, somersaulted once, and bounced up, shooting. "Trevor," came a voice from behind him. Blam! Blam! Blam! The rifle kept firing, taking out enemies left, right, and center. A German bullet tore into his shoulder. It didn't slow him down. Louder this time: "Trevor." "I'm busy!" Trevor Firestone's thumb worked like a piston on the game controller in his hands. On the screen, the soldier took shot after shot. Three more bullets ripped into him, knocking him down to one knee. He fought on, bellowing in anger, triumph, and pain. Trevor bellowed right along with him, wrestling with the controller as if it would help destroy the enemy. Pop! For a moment, the soldier was frozen there, his face contorted with agony and heroic effort. Then the screen went dark. "What?" Trevor wheeled around to find his father leaning over the game console, the plug in his hand. "What did you do that for? I was in the middle of this amazing battle!" "I think two and a half hours of battling is enough for one day," Daniel Firestone told his son. "No!" Trevor exclaimed in true pain. "Didn't you see how many Germans I was killing? It had to be a personal best! I can't believe you pulled the plug before my progress could get saved! How am I supposed to level up now?"

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Thank you. Thank you. So, yeah, we can see already there's going to be a sharp contrast between the video game war and the actual war. Thanks. Okay. Carol, let's move on to you. Same question.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: The first part of the question was how did I come to be interested in, in the second world war?

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah, to write a book about this particular time and place within that context.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Okay. Sure. Well, first of all, both of my parents were involved in the second world war, and I originally thought that I would write something, as Michelle described, from their point of view, but I just couldn't quite get into that, but I, and I wanted to understand more about the war than I already knew so I began reading works of history and found it very interesting. I should say at the same time that when I was quite young, and perhaps this was as a result of having parents who were in the war, I became aware, very aware, of what had happened, and I still remember, probably at the age of ten, being quite shocked and horrified and thinking, I'm part of this species that makes war in this way and commits these terrible atrocities, and it really haunted me for quite a while. So, in any case, I began sort of working on this a little bit and I wrote some from one character's point of view and then as often happens when you're writing fiction, another character kind of appears from nowhere. In my case, it was the character of Anna who in the novel is a child, but I imagined her as a young woman living in the United States after the events that took place in the novel, and I had a lot of trouble writing from Anna's point of view because her life was so different from mine. She was born and grew up in Prague, which is a city I know very little about, or, I know more now than I did then, and so I always had Anna's story in my mind as I was working on the first section of the novel, which is Natalia's story. Natalia and Miklos, who she eventually marries. I just, I found it really a privilege, in a way, as a writer to have these characters kind of open themselves up to me as I wrote, and I became more immersed in their lives. I do have that problem I think that some writers have, and it's kind of debated, do you control the characters or do they control you.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Uh huh.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: I really felt that these characters had actual lived lives that I had to discover, which is kind of an exciting part of writing fiction, when it begins to seem not like fiction but real lives.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Absolutely. Your characters do feel like fully realized people with very complex lives and lives that are all intertwined with each other in very interesting ways.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Oh, thank you. That's good. Yeah, I almost want to live every minute of their lives, and really you have to discipline yourselves. You can't describe every minute of every character's life obviously, and then I had to take these characters through some very dark events and live that with them in a meaningful way without perhaps overdramatizing the events with which most people are familiar but not everyone, and I think that is an important part of writing about the second world war. Although, as you said, there are lots and lots of books on the second world war, both fiction and nonfiction, it's really important.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Agreed. Yeah.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Sorry.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: No. Yeah. I just wanted to say I want to come back with all of to you that topic of writing about some really horrific experiences that your characters go through and how you deal with that, but first I'd like to ask you to read from your book, Carol.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Oh, yes. This is from a section towards the end of the novel after most of the tragedy has occurred, but Anna and Natalia, who knew each other in Prague meet again as prisoners actually in a concentration camp, not an extermination camp but a concentration camp, in western Berlin, sorry, west of Berlin, where the British Army has liberated the camp and professionals have moved in. A young social worker with the United Nations Relief and Refugee Agency is there, and he takes an interest in Anna who is 15 years old. He gives her a pair of shoes that he gets for her from the United States, he gives her a chocolate bar, and at this time, the former prisoners are able to get together, they're communicating, there are people there who are involving them in sports and music and entertainment and planning for their future lives, and so Anna has been given a chocolate bar by the young social worker and she shares that with Anna and they sit outside in the sun. Nearby, a man played a violin, and when he took a break, he came over to where Anna and Natalia were seated and said this was his farewell performance. He was leaving in the morning for a displaced persons camp. "Do I congratulate you?" Natalia said. He laughed. His name was Zoltan; he was Hungarian. He was from Kezthely. "I know that town," Natalia said, shading her eyes from the sun. "I met my husband there. Or near there." "I'm not going back," said Zoltan. "I have friends who emigrated to Los Angeles years ago. They're in the film industry, and they're going to see what they can do for me." "You're a filmmaker?" "A playwright. That is, I'm an architect. I was an architect, and I got inspired to write one play, a smidgeon of a one-act play, but eventually it got produced at a theater in Budapest." "My husband is a writer," Natalia said. "What is his name?" Natalia told him her husband's name. "Are you kidding?" Zoltan said. He held out his arms, the violin in his hand. "I knew him, for God's sake. A long time ago, in Budapest. There was a group of writers, architects, musicians, composers, who called themselves the Elastics, and I hung around with them, and so did your husband, sometimes, when he was in Budapest. By the way," he said to Anna, "do you know why we called ourselves the Elastics?" "The shoes," Natalia said. "Exactly. The shoes we wore, with elastic sides, no laces. I want to ask, and I'm afraid to ask. Where is your husband? Is he well?" "You mean is he alive? I don't know. I'm going to find him" Natalia said. Anna listened to Natalia and this man called Zoltan and leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, so that she could admire her shoes, which did not, thank goodness, have elastic sides. A British soldier was playing soccer with some of the boys. They were all different ages and spoke many languages, but they all seemed to know how to play soccer. People walked past where she and Natalia were sitting. Six weeks, they were in Hell and now here they were strolling in the sun. People were remarkably durable and resilient. Maybe too resilient. It shocked her a little. She didn't know what to make of it. Perhaps on the inside, in the soul, in the heart, it was a different matter. She felt happy, and yet she also felt angry, all the time. Once, in a group of doctors walking past, Anna saw her mother. Her crown of braided hair shone in the sun. She was wearing a gray wool-

flannel skirt, a blouse she liked, and over this a doctor's white coat. Look, Anna nearly said to Natalia. Look, my mother is here. But she knew that her mother was not, in fact, there.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Thank you for that beautiful reading, Carol.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Thank you.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Before we go on, I would just like to say to the audience that if you have questions for our readers today, you're welcome to type them into the chat bar and we will get to them a little bit later, but don't hesitate to write them down.

So, Carol already touched on this about, you know, and these are all stories of survival for sure and within stories of survival there is kind of inevitably stories of other people who don't survive and stories of loss and, in this case, you know, really kind of atrocious violence and trauma. So, I just, I'd like to ask, I mean, you're all writing for actually different ages, you know, from very young to young adult to adult, but you do all have young characters in your stories who witness really horrific scenes of violence and lose people close to them in shocking and traumatizing ways, so I wonder how you, this is, again, a very broad and complicated question, I'm sure, but how you came to figure out how to do that for your particular audience and for your particular characters in a way that was both honest and not gratuitous and served your story and your readership. I guess I'll start with you again, Michelle.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Well, it's a great question, and the answer is that I had to keep changing it a lot. It was really important to me to be honest to the times, but, so you couldn't sugar coat what had happened but at the same time of course you don't want to traumatize your readers, nor did I want to numb them because that was what I found when I was reading through the research, particularly of rape, that there was so much of it that after a while you're just sort of reading it and thinking, yeah, okay, okay, and then I thought, no, that is not what I want to transmit in my novel. So, I think, in that sense, less is more. I had to sort of focus on just a few things that were going to happen like that, but one of the hardest moments I felt, and I'm not giving anything away by telling this because it happens right near the beginning of the book, is when Katja's mother is shot. One of the reasons why it was so hard for me is that in the previous draft of the novel, Mutti lives throughout the entire novel, so I got to know her as a character very, very well, and then I, you know, rewrote the book and put her in the beginning and killed her off right at the beginning, and that was traumatic. I don't know how readers felt about it, but for me it was a very traumatic choice because I had grown attached to her, and I sort of saw her as my grandmother even though, you know, that's not who she was, but she was kind of based on her, so I had, I mean, I struggled with that. I struggled with most of the moments of violence and trauma. They're hard to write because, you know, as a writer you're putting yourself in the shoes of your characters and you're right there, you know, living through this, and, you know, when I think about my mother having gone through these, I don't know exactly what she went through

because of course there are things that she didn't tell me and I think there's probably things that she blocked out, but she probably saw a lot more than what I know, and so I, you know, I would be also extrapolating and thinking, you know, my mother probably saw things like this, and it was very hard for me to be in those shoes.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah, I mean, I was wondering about that scene in particular because it does take place so early in the novel and it leaves the character, who is very young and her barely older sister on their own as orphans and also with the guilt of, you know, feeling responsible for their mother having been shot in front of them, so, like it's not only the horror of seeing that happen but then the aftermath and being alone and living with the guilt of it, so that was a really heavy weight for your characters to bear, and, yeah, I mean, you answered my question, but I was wondering how you came to decide to do that, and, I mean, I guess you just answered that already.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Yeah, well, I mean, honestly I don't really remember how I decided to do that. I mean, I guess a lot of why writers tend to get rid of the parents is just so that the characters have more agency. I don't think that was the reason why I did that. I don't remember my decision. I wrote this novel so many times.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Uh-huh.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: I actually had to re-read it to make sure I remembered which version ended up being published. One of the things I did struggle with was the aftermath of the shooting because Katja and Hilde have, you know, interactions where they're joking around with each other and there is, you know, some humor in the novel that sort of lightens the heavy mood, but I had trouble with, you know, where do you put that in right after your mother has been shot? Like, you can't, they can't all of a sudden be joking around and so time has to pass, but then a reader doesn't want to wade through 30 pages of time passing, you know, and the characters grieving, so that was one of the big challenges was to how to get the story moving and yet also be true to the emotional landscape of having just seen your mother be shot, so it was challenging. It was probably twice as long as it is, as it ended up being. I had to cut a lot of things out.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Not surprising. Yeah. Gordon, how about you? How did you decide how to handle the scenes of death and violence for a young audience?

>> GORDON KORMAN: Well, I think I probably had to be, you know, the most careful just because, you know, War Stories is a middle grade novel, so it would sort of reach the youngest audience. I mean, I think that in terms of, in terms of the character of Trevor, right, because of the structure of the novel, he/himself didn't encounter World War II directly, right. He got everything through his grandfather, his great grandfather's stories, but the interesting thing is, you know, from our perspective as adults, Jacob Firestone, the great grandfather, was actually 17 years old when he was going through the war, so to me he seems like kind of a kid, too. To middle grade readers, it's like, oh, 17, you know, that's pretty old. He's ready to kind of take it on, but, I mean, I think that the word you used as you introduced the whole question was honesty, right. You just have to be really, really honest. You know, that doesn't mean I have to sort of go, you

know, full on blood and gore, although, certainly, you know, when you're doing research about any topic, but, you know, certainly World War II, you're given a lot of choices, right. There's such a vast amount of material that you get to choose what you use and what you don't use, you know, and, like one of the things that I never thought of, but any description of battles in World War II, one of them is just that all of these areas smelled because so many farm animals were killed during the course of these cross-fires and no one would do anything with those carcasses, so there were just vast amounts of decaying animal carcasses everywhere. That was something that I chose not to put in my book.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: I was just thinking, I don't remember that.

>> GORDON KORMAN: I mean, it's honest, it certainly really happened, but I think that would really freak a kid out, just the idea that this is going on. You know, I was fascinated actually by what Michelle said because it never occurred to me when a writer makes a decision to kill a certain character, have a certain character die, is it different when you've already done another draft of the book where that character sort of made it through and lived for the entire book, and, yeah, I totally get that that could be a much more kind of real death from the standpoint of the writer then. One of the things that I thought was a very interesting scene to write in War Stories is at the very end. There is a scene of Jacob and his war buddies from right before they go into battle, and in that case, I'm writing in the present tense about characters who by this point in the book, the reader, the pretty young reader, already knows is not going to make it and how much more weight their words and actions would take in that, you know, pretty small kind of light scene. I sort of felt like that was the one that I kind of used as a load star to guide me through exactly what my readers, you know, I mean, even though it certainly was not a gory scene or a violent scene, it was a scene that made you think about all of the things that were to come.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah, it really works very well, that scene, and I know the scene you're talking about and it is like he's young, I mean, young from our perspective, I guess, not that young, like you said, from the reader's perspective, but essentially teenagers kind of like going off on an adventure and bonding and becoming friends, and you know, you know, which one is going to make it and which ones aren't. So, yeah, it worked very well and it really brings home, because I know that's what you're trying to do in the book is show how, you know, war is not a game, essentially.

>> GORDON KORMAN: Right.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: It is not a fun, a fun video game experience when you're actually living it and that's, I mean, one way you could do that is by like with like with the shock value of blood and gore and violence and you don't really do that, but by having the emotional, like, making the reader feel that emotional loss of these actual young men - -

>> GORDON KORMAN: I think one of the ironies is that in War Stories, the most violent scenes are all in video games.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Uh-huh. That's right. Yeah. Yeah. That's really interesting. Well, Carol, you already touched a bit on how you tried to find a balance between, again, honesty and, you know, shying away from scenes of violence and, you know, bodily horror and so on. Do you want to talk a little more about that?

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Yes. Well, one of the things that I tried to do in this novel was to contrast the lives that the characters had as these events were beginning to unfold, and I chose to, because I couldn't leave anything out, I chose to include history from the beginning of the Soviet revolution, the beginning of the Soviet Union, and so there are, there are little fragments of history from the first world war, the revolution in 1917 that led to the Soviet Union, and there are incidents of brutality that are reported that are associated with those events that I feel are presented in, from quite a distance from a historical distance and contrast with the normality of life.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Uh-huh.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: It does go through quite a few years before leading up to the second world war.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yes.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: I wanted to show what life was like in Germany before the war and after the war and how this can happen and did happen to the most ordinary people whose lives were very happy and fulfilled and complete before the war and then the violence that happened, I feel, was the complete ripping apart of their normal lives, so there are some scenes of brutality. They're very short, I think.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Uh-huh.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: There's a scene where Natalia does undergo some torture, and it was difficult to write for two reasons. One was I wanted to make it believable, in which case I would have to be explicit, and I didn't want to do that because I didn't want to trespass almost in a way on the real people who had really experienced these events. I mean, it is a really a problem, I think, not to want to exploit stories of torture or violence but at the same time to give a sense of how horrific it is to live through something like that. So, it was a matter of balancing constantly and rewriting and writing and rewriting.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Right. Yeah. As it always is, right? I'd like to just invite the audience again, I mean, this is your chance to ask any questions that you might have so just type them in if you'd like to, and, in the meantime, I will ask a couple of smaller things. Michelle, I was wondering about music in your book. There's a huge role for Katja's love of music. So how did that come about in your story?

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Well, that was part of the fictionalizing of the main character because in the beginning, in the first draft I wrote, Katja was basically a stand-in for my mother and when I realized that that wasn't going to work and I had to make her into somebody different, I gave her music, which is something that I grew up with. I played piano for many years growing up and then set it aside for a while and actually just have

a piano coming on Monday, so I'm really looking forward to it. Most of the music that she discusses is music that I played and so it's important to me. It's something that I grew up with and so that's, and I feel like music is a language that transcends other things and it becomes a counterbalance that, as Carol was talking about, sort of balancing of the violence. I felt like music was one way to create that balance so that there was a little bit of joy in the book, as well.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah, it works really well and it also gives you an opportunity to write some amazing scenes where the character goes to great lengths to be able to find and play a piano.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Yeah.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah. Gordon, this is a sort of slightly superficial question, or I don't know, but your book is set in 2020 and kind of like ends up being in this alternate world where there's no pandemic, right, so I'm curious, I mean, I just was feeling for you as a writer thinking, you know, like it has to be, this had to be set in 2020 because it's the 75th anniversary.

>> GORDON KORMAN: Well, I learned the lesson of, you know, when you make the, not that it's a bad thing to put hard dates that have not yet happened in a book but that when you do, you are certainly subject to what really happens on those hard dates. So, I think that in paperback we have changed that so that it now just says present day for all of the, instead of the specific, just because 2020 is just such a trigger kind of year.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yeah.

>> GORDON KORMAN: When kids see that, they're like, oh, that's not possible. It certainly is still, you know, must be 2020 because it is the 75th anniversary of VE Day, but it doesn't actually like give specific days dates in 2020 anymore.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Yep. Okay. That's interesting. Yeah the copy I have does.

>> GORDON KORMAN: I mean, as, as writers I'm sure we've all dealt with little situations like that coming out. You know, my first book went through revision the year that Canada switched to the metric system. I remember being a 13-year-old kid trying to figure out, you know, how to change he inched his way across the windowsill. You know, stuff happens, and it certainly did in a big way with War Stories.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: I'm sure you're not the only writer to have set a book in 2020 and then had to figure out what to do about it. Carol, I'm curious what you think about, you know, I think it was you who was talking about this is history, not ancient history, and, you know, we're getting to the point now where a lot of people, most of the people who actually lived through this time are no longer with us, and I wonder if, you know, we're going to continue to tell our children about it, if I's going to continue to carry the same weight. I know this is, again, a huge question, but what do you think about that, about, you know, the legacy of the second world war and how it has been so huge in our, you

know, imaginations since it happened and now it's just starting to get a little bit more distant?

>> CAROL WINDLEY: It is. It's getting very distant, and there's so much intervening history that will fill in and take the place of that, and it is, but first of all I should say that I really do believe that from that point, from the events that occurred during those years, everything must have changed for humanity, for people. I mean, it really is a horrific and colossal event, and there's never been anything like it.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Uh-huh.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: It cannot be forgotten, and there are a lot of history books, you know, not fiction, but history books that document the events of those years, and those books are really important, but to reach people who are not historians or particularly interested in history or study history, I think it is necessary for fiction to do that, to undertake that task. In fact, I came across this week a quotation, and I think it is from a writer you well know of, Harari, who wrote *Sapiens* and other books, and I wrote it down and I'm just going to read it. To understand the world, you need to take fiction seriously. I thought that was a beautiful quotation, and it really exemplifies what I'm trying to say that we have to understand what happened and not forget it and fiction is perhaps, fiction and theater and film, are ways that we can do that.

>> NAOMI K. LEWIS: Thank you for that, Carol, and then Cynthia is back with us, and I know she has some questions for you, as well.

>> CYNTHIA GOOD: I do. We're almost at the end of our time, but we did get two questions from the audience that I would love to pose to you, and this one is for Michelle and probably Carol, as well, and the good question is, what did your mothers think of your novels?

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Well, my mom loved it. It actually is a good question because I was a little bit nervous about handing her over a book, you know, from the German point of view that really does ask a lot of tough questions about, you know, what did German people know, what did they not know? What was their responsibility when it came to helping people who they saw were in trouble? I wasn't sure how she was going to respond to that, or my other relatives for that matter, and they all responded very favorably. I think my mom feels, I think she feels kind of honored that I'm spending the time to think about where she came from and what she lived through. So, yeah, but it was, I was, I was definitely nervous.

>> CYNTHIA GOOD: I'm sure she does feel honored in the way that you did it. Carol, what about your family? How did they respond?

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Well, my mother was always very supportive of my writing. She didn't get to read this novel, and I wish she had, and also in another way it's perhaps good that she didn't because I wrote mostly about German characters who are very sympathetic and my mother as a young girl, a teenager, went through the war living in

one of England's most heavily bombed cities. She lived through the Blitz, so it would have been interesting to know what she would have thought.

>> CYNTHIA GOOD: Uh-huh. I'm sure she would have appreciated your beautiful writing and the approach that you took. This other question that I have is, it's lovely because it reflects, I think, the way that the audience feels when they listen to you talk about the way that you approached your material. Did any of you cry while you were writing the novels? Not meant to be, says this questioner, a silly question. Just wondering how this writing might have affected you.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: Me?

>> CYNTHIA GOOD: Carol.

>> CAROL WINDLEY: That is a really good question. It did affect me a lot. I was surprised, in fact, at how, how real or how much I became involved with the characters' lives. I perhaps didn't quite dream about them but came close to that and their tragedies really touched me. I don't think I cried when I was writing the novel. I always keep that little dictum that Anton Chekhov had, you know, write, how did he say it, write with a cold heart or a cold eye, and, so, no, I didn't cry but I came close.

>> CYNTHIA GOOD: Thank you. Michelle, Gordon. Did you, did you shed a tear?

>> GORDON KORMAN: I don't think I did because obviously I follow Chekhov, you know, I'm down with Chekhov. I certainly became emotional, particularly the scene at the end where I was writing about characters, some of whom did not survive the events of the book, but I, you know, this is going to seem kind of silly, but I can get pretty emotional in a book regardless of how sad the content is, you know. I remember a long time ago I wrote a book about a kid playing little league baseball and he just wanted to throw a curve ball and he could not throw a curve ball and, you know, he kept coming back to it again and again and again and finally at the end like he threw a curve ball. Like, you know, the ball went out there straight and it finally curved, and I don't know why, maybe it was just because I was so involved in this kid's struggle and I had sort of suffered through his suffering through this entire extremely light, not particularly sad book, mostly a comedy, that that when he was able to throw this curve ball, I kind of choked up a little bit, and so I think that going by me, the content of the book, no matter how emotional it is, no matter how sad it is, no matter how tragic it is, it is not any more likely or less likely to make me get emotionally involved when I'm writing a certain scene.

>> CYNTHIA GOOD: I'm with you on the baseball, Gordon. Michelle, you have the last word.

>> MICHELLE BARKER: Yeah, well, I guess I'm the weepy one of the crowd because I cry every time that I read my book, and I have had to read it a few times, as I've said, because I forget what I decided on, and I changed the ending many times but the ending is where I tend to cry, and I got really attached to the character, and I won't say too much about it, who actually ended up being a throw-in in a later draft because I

didn't have him in the beginning of the novel that I had conceived, and, yeah, at the end of the book, every time I read it, I feel like such a dork because I'm crying. I don't know. I guess I don't really follow Chekhov.