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Vine Awards Panel 2: Storytelling, Family & Loss

Sidura Ludwig, Nessa Rapoport, Rick Salutin and Gideon Salutin in conversation with Nathan Adler

>> NATHAN ADLER: Welcome, everybody. Thanks for introducing yourself, and I'm so happy to meet all of you. This is the first time I've met any of you, but I'm very familiar with your books, so I'm very excited to have the chance to have this conversation with you. I just want to say how much I really love your books. Like, I'm really thrilled I get, yeah, to meet you because I'm your fan, so because like I had to read a lot of books and then these were the ones that I loved, so I actually am really, really happy to meet you and to get to discuss your work. So, welcome, and I guess I'll start asking you guys some questions. So, we can, I'll start with Sidura. Where's your book? You Are Not What We Expected is your collection of short stories. These are linked stories that resolve around the Levine family. There's neighbors like --- and ---, there's --- the Australian bride who is referred to again later on in the book in another story, there's transformations at an orthodox wedding, there's people that the Levine family don't even know but they exist in the same social galaxy as the main Levine family in the book. Sometimes the connections to the Levine's, there's not always direct, it's not always clear how the other characters in the book kind of relate to the Levine's, but it feels like the Levine family is front and center in this collection, so I was wondering if the Levine family was always supposed to be the thread that ties the stories together, how these stories came about, whether it was an organic process or did you have it all like planned out ahead of time, and, yeah, it's a process question but also a structure question because it almost feels like this book is almost like a novel more than a traditional short story collection.

>> SIDURA LUDWIG: Can I jump in? It's funny that you, first of all, I planned nothing, so I'm glad that it, I'm glad that it comes together cohesively. I started out, yes, the Levine family was always the family that I was focused on, but I actually started out this process writing a novel and it was a novel about the uncle, Isaac, and it was all from his perspective. I was, this was a number of years ago now, and my youngest child, I have three kids and my youngest was about maybe 3 years old, 2 or 3 years old, because I remember he was still in like home daycare so I would write when, you know, when he was sleeping or I'd write when he was in daycare, but I was a tired young mom and I was finding, you know, at the end of the day I was having trouble even reading, reading a novel, and anyway, so every day I sat down and I wrote, you know, 1000 words,

whatever my, whatever my word count limit or goal was for that day. Anyway, one day I sat down and I took a look at what I had and it was just, like I said, it was going nowhere. It was just, it just wasn't working, and I sort of, you know, I put two and two together. I had this epiphany when I realized that if I was falling asleep, you know, after reading for 10 minutes at night, if I was too tired to read a novel I was probably at a stage in my life where I was too tired to write one. I just, it just wasn't what I, I just wasn't in a place to hold that kind of story in my head, but my first love has always been short fiction and that's, and what's what I, what I wanted to go back to fall back in love with writing because when you battle with your writing, when you work so long on a project and it's not working, I think as you know, that can be really, that can be hard on the self-esteem, and so I decided to go back and try these stories, try these characters in a short story format largely because I really needed to start, be able to start and finish something and I, and that was what I could contain at that time in my head and so that's what I did. I played with the characters in these different, in these short stories, and the freedom that it gave me without having the confines of a novel to be able to jump in and out of the Levine family life at different stages but also their neighbors, and then I realized I was opening, I was actually opening myself up to a larger story here than just what this family's or the uncle's story was, so that I, that's a bit of a process and it gives you a bit of an idea about the, how this, how the book came to be. I hope that answers your question.

>> NATHAN ADLER: It does, yeah, because I was kind of wondering, like it almost feels like it has a lot of novel-like kind of characteristics, and I'm like, I think that's partly why I loved it so much is that because it wasn't like your traditional short story collection where all the stories were separate and discrete but all the characters were just like you have little hints of them in each story and I was always, my brain was always trying to make all these connections between each story, and I'm like, okay, wait that was the neighbor there and that was the grandpa and then I was trying to figure out like how they were like a constellation, a social constellation around this Levine family, but some stories are a bit further away but it's harder, but, yeah, I really enjoyed your collection. I think we'll go on to Nessa's novel because she, that novel also had a really interesting kind of structural device. It was based on the rituals of Jewish mourning and the 7 days of sitting shiva, and I wondered if you could talk a little about this choice as a structural device to organize the timeline for the novel and providing a framework for the narrative arc. It takes place within this specific timeframe, which makes it feel very immediate, and it's also written in the presence tense, but it also has this retrospective feel, so I'm wondering if you could talk a little about some of those choices.

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: Yes, thank you. I'm really happy to be here and that's a good question. I had a very different journey with this novel than what I expected. The first chapter that's the setup fell out of me like a gift, and I was under the illusion I could write the whole book in about a year, and I had written the previous book that's only partially

been published over 10 years so I was like this is going to be great. Well, it took 30 years because that first chapter, nothing happened after that the way I expected, and the first chapter, the reason it was hard for me is because the first chapter has a compulsive story. I wasn't used to writing like that. These two sisters, as you said, it shuttles back and forth between the past and present over the shiva, and the dead sister is always in the head of living sister. They're still engaged in conversation and argument and we hear Tam, the older sister who's not alive anymore, in Eve, the narrator's, brain, so in the first chapter you find out a number of things. You find out that the sisters had a huge fight two weeks before Tam's death and they did not reconcile. I knew that, but I didn't know what the fight was about. From the beginning, there's a huge secret that upends Eve's idea of her sister, of herself and of her family. I knew what that secret was, but I didn't know how to narrate it along with what turned out to be many, many secrets of this family. I'm a very controlling eldest child human being, and I wasn't used to the way this novel kept getting away from me. Differently, Sidura, from what you're talking about, but I was not in control. I made a million outlines, I tried this and that, I killed many trees in the early days of trying to figure out what this was going to do, but I got to the point where people stopped asking me how it was going. I published the poems and the memoir in between, but I never forsook these two sisters. I knew they held me in their grip, and when people thought I was stalling or unable to let it go, I knew I would feel the click and, in fact, finally, I did. In terms of the 7 day structure, interestingly, a friend who'd read my first novel and then this novel said, oh, I see this has some of your signatures in it, and I said, what do you mean? Well, it turns out my first novel was also 6.5 days structure. I hadn't realized the parallel. There's a summer cottage in both novels, and there's an eminent and very accomplished grandmother in both novels. They are very different books, but it took somebody else to see the hallmark. I think what fascinated me about, the two sisters were in the death-life situation before I thought of the structure, but what fascinates me about shiva is on the one hand, "nothing happens" and you're sitting still and people are coming to you and telling you stories. On the other hand, you find out all kinds of things you didn't realize often when people talk, and often people put their foot in their mouth so even with the best of intention there's a lot of inadvertent humor in a shiva, and I wanted to sort of capture the drama of sitting still and yet the past and the present continually clashing.

>> NATHAN ADLER: That's really interesting. I like how you talk about like how like stories and humor come out of those unexpected, so those days that you sit and people come to you and they tell the stories and I think it's a beautiful perfect fit for your novel in terms of structure, and I really do love how it makes it feel very immediate but then woven in is that all those stories that are these like flashbacks to the past and, yeah, it's really a beautiful novel.

I think we'll go, next I would like to ask a question from Rick and Gideon because your book also had an interesting structure built into it. So, this book had the form and content was really matched really well. It's a conversation between the father and son, Rick and Gideon, but it's also a comic book. It's like a Coles notes type summary of the bible stories but it's also illustrated, it's in the form of marginalia, like literally on the margins, and it's nonfiction. At first I looked at the book at first and I thought, oh, it looks like a kid's book almost, but these stories are very, there's really a lot of depth and insight into them, so I wondered how did you decide on an illustrated story and how did you kind of settle or pick up this format of the biblical commentary as a way of delivering the story? Rick or Gideon, you can start.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Well, the format is, I studied this stuff for a long time. I was at a rabbinical seminary in New York before I dropped out, and I lived and studied in Israel, and I loved the tradition, the medieval biblical commentaries that were published in very large format with the biblical text in the center and 6 to 7 commentaries around the side, all dialoguing with each other from different ages as they discussed the central text. I just love that stuff, and it just seemed like when it became a question of the conversation with Gideon, that was a good context, or it was a good format.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Interesting, and Gideon, did you know about these biblical commentaries as like a, as a medium for delivering it before this was chosen as the structure, or was it just something organic from Rick's experience?

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: It's tricky to say for me for that because this book was sort of discussed with me sort of since my consciousness because we talked about this, it was originally meant to be you telling me the 6-year-old or something the story of the bible and then that sort of proceeded over the years and we ended up doing it when I was I was, I want to say like 15 or something or 16 and we just went up to our cottage for a summer and it was the first time, I had heard all of these stories growing up as a kid the way we all do, the story of Noah's ark and Moses, but it was the first time I'd read the original text because I didn't have a religious upbringing, so I would read the text and then in the evenings we would discuss it, and I would say this is crazy, and you would say, yeah, it is, and so all of that morphed together. I had no idea. I mean, there's no way I knew that when, that I knew about these commentaries when I was 4, but it was pretty early on that we had an idea of the structure.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Yeah, I'd say, I mean, for me, it had to do with the fact Gideon is half Jewish. His mother is not Jewish, and I am, so by the traditional criteria, he would not be Jewish, but it's okay. I knew he wasn't going to have a traditional Jewish upbringing and wasn't going to have a bar mitzvah, but I wanted him to that half of himself, so it came out in the form of these stories and in a sort of half-assed observance of the holidays where we would also tell the stories, and I thought maybe if we, just, you know, sort of go this, improvise all of this as he as he grows up, the Jewish part we'll get to be, he'll make something of it, and it sort of worked.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Sort of miraculous, but yeah.

>> NATHAN ADLER: So, it was like when you were 15 that's when it kind of gelled into like, hey, this would make a good story or a good book?

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: I think we always felt that it would, but I'm glad we did it when I was that age. It just would have been a totally different book.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Yeah, and I'd make notes at the end of, I'd make notes as we talked and that became the sort of skeleton for the text.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Alright. That's cool. That's really fascinating history behind how that book came about.

I think up next we'll ask Sidura another question about characters. Isaac's character is, he's such a character, he's angry, he's quirky, he's kind of unlikable at times, at others he's a source of pity or sympathy. Are we, as readers are we supposed to like him or hate him or feel sorry for him? Like, I kind of felt all those things all at once. He feels like a really sad character at times and at other times he's like comical, like George Costanza from Seinfeld, so I'm just wondering where did he come from, who is he modeled after, and, as his creator, what do you like about Isaac and what do you dislike about him, and do you like him, and at one point, that's a lot of questions, but at one point his sister says, you of all people should know better, insinuating that he's mentally challenged in some way, which is really hilarious, but then I also wondered whether, hey, maybe is there something wrong with this guy, like what's his back story, so I wondered if you could talk a bit more about his character and some of those things.

>> SIDURA LUDWIG: Sure. Yeah, no, there's nothing wrong with Isaac. Isaac is who he is. He's completely unapologetic for being who he is, and in terms of how I, I never really thought how I wanted the reader to respond to him. All I thought about was that I wanted, I wanted to be as authentic and write authentically for who he was and make sure that I put him down on the page, so if he made you feel all of those things then I think I did my job because, you know, I think, even, when I'm creating characters, I'm really looking to try to reflect people and not, not, you know, a character is something that could be flat but a person is 3-dimensional, multidimensional, and, and so, you know, people are not always happy or people are not always funny or people are not always sad or people are not always tragic. I mean, these are, these are, a person goes through all different kinds of situations in their lives and responds to it in different ways, and so I, you know, I want all my characters to be reflective that way and particularly Isaac. What I loved about, oh, so, sorry, where he came from, he is absolutely based on a member of our extended family, my husband's uncle is equally unapologetic for who he is and would, he's not as, he's not as mobile anymore but he used to come over to us regularly on a Friday night, and he would walk in and he would say, I've got a story, you've gotta, I've got a story. One time he came in, this was years ago, and he said, I've gotta tell you the story about the flags, and he told me this story about these two flags, the one flying below the other and how he marched right into the

school. I turned to my husband and said, like, I'm sorry, I gotta, that's a gift. I can't, I can't write that like that. I need that. So that was actually the first, that was, that was the first story that I wrote using him, and then, and then I just, and then I just wanted to dive deeper. I just wanted to dive deeper into who this person was lived really on his own by his own rules, and that is so, so what I love about him, what I love about writing him is it's what would drive me nuts as a person probably but that is so opposite from who I am. I am the kind of person who, tell me the rule and I'm going to follow the rule and make everybody feel comfortable and, you know, smile and on and on, and this character allowed me to be somebody completely different on the page that I could get into him and embody him, and that was fun. That was really, really fun to write, and, and I, I just enjoyed, you know, I just enjoyed every time that I got to explore him deeper and, and figure out what was making him tick.

>> NATHAN ADLER: That's great. That is a little kernel of truth in there that he was based on like that little germ of the whole character. That's really amazing and it makes me laugh that he's modeled after this uncle of yours. At this point, I think it's a great time for you to do a little short reading for us.

>> SIDURA LUDWIG: Okay, sure. So, I'm going to read from the first story, the one I was just describing called, The Flag.

I'll read the first couple pages or not even.

Isaac would like people to understand that the world has rules, and that these rules should not be ignored. You should not kill another human being. You should not steal. You should make an effort to look after your community and help it to flourish, and you should never, not under any circumstances, fly one country's flag underneath another's.

"It's degrading!" he is yelling at the man with the black velvet skullcap. "It's disrespectful! I can't even stand to look at what you have done. You want to honour Israel, but you've done just the opposite!"

The man, the principal of the very school Isaac has barged into, is nodding his head politely - albeit with his arms crossed in front of his chest, his back very straight, feet shoulder-width apart. As Isaac berates him, the principal wonders if now is the right time to organize proper security at the school. Don't ask how Isaac (elderly, short, inconspicuous) managed to just walk right into this building. Other schools in this Jewish neighbor just north of Toronto have elaborate security checks, offices positioned by the front door, secretaries with panic buttons, security guards out front. But Isaac was just out on his morning walk. He was taking the route he always takes, past the brownstone townhouses, past the strip mall filled with kosher shops, a bakery, a pizza parlour. Past the Lubavitch community centre and then past the houses on the boulevard, which are starting to look tired from all the children who live in him. Tired the way a favourite T-shirt gets frayed and faded on someone who, over the years, has put on ten pounds. He walks past all the bicycles and scooters, the double strollers parked

on the narrow front lawns, and then passes this school, of which he never took notice. Until today. On the flagpole there are two flags instead of one. And the Israeli flag is flying below the Canadian.

Thank you.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Ah, great. Thank you, Sidura. That was a beautiful little reading, and it really describes Isaac's character like really well, which brings me back to Evening, Nessa's book. So, this book is actually like a really kind of sexy book. It's more sexy than you would expect for a book about mourning and death. There's a lot of humor foregrounded by loss, and the character of Eve is really preoccupied with love and sex, even in the midst of mourning her sister, Tam, and there's something about that juxtaposition that's entertaining and funny because of the contrast, so I wondered, is Eve's preoccupation with her love life, is it a distraction?

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: For her or for me?

>> NATHAN ADLER: For Eve.

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: I see what you're saying. Is she unable to focus on the grief for her sister so she's deflecting it into her erotic life?

>> NATHAN ADLER: Yeah, like that's what I was wondering. Is she just like, is she just like protecting herself in some way, or is she actually like, Hernan says, just like boy crazy or is it about seeking validation in life, of life in the face of death?

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: That's a question no one's ever asked me, so thank you for that. I think grief heightened to an extreme degree all feeling, and I think it's very natural in a situation where your emotions are being worn very intensely that if, for example, as happens to Eve, her first love from her native city walks into the shiva, many, many things happen within her that she doesn't expect to happen but that are very much not deflected from the shiva but derived from grief. I mean, we all know that you're told that if you lose somebody important, don't make any other changes in the first year. Don't move. Don't change jobs. So, Eve is wide open to feeling, and I think, as we all learn and as she learns, her initial feelings and what she takes us through aren't the feelings she ends up with at the end of the 7 days. So, the other thing that has fascinated me, Rick mentioned studying the sources. I'm fascinated by the fact that somebody told me that if you're a woman who's unpartnered and you're sitting shiva, you can still put on makeup, which mostly a grieving person in Jewish life would not do because you never know who could either walk in the door or have an idea for you, and I like the premium placed on finding a partner but also this idea that the tradition is kind of looking out for you because of course the legal part of sitting shiva, you're not, if you're really stringent, you're not even taking a shower, but you're certainly not putting on makeup, combing your hair, or wearing anything but that torn garment every day, so I think somewhere in the back of my mind those two things got juxtaposed. That heightened feeling of her character and that one law of which there are probably many others that is ironically brought to the fore in her sitting shiva.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Uh huh, and I think that kind of answers it a little bit, yeah. I, it also makes it extra more the contrast itself between the mourning rituals and then, and then her focus on her love life, it's, in some ways it felt like a romantic comedy and it has some of the conventions of romantic comedy but also with this mourning, in a time of mourning, so I really love that contrast between those things.

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: I'm glad you're saying that, and also, she comes home and of course like many adults she falls into the stereotypes of how people from her home see her, and seeing her the way you described her is immediately part of her, the affect that she has, and she is a drama queen so she can't help amplifying it.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Yeah, all right. Well, that's very interesting I think, yeah. Up next I think we should ask a question, another question for Rick and Gideon. I was kind of wondering what the writing process was like, the creative collaboration working with the autobiographical components of this story but also what was it like working for your father, Gideon, and, Rick, what was it like working with your son on this project, and also what it was like working with your illustrator, Dushen Petricheck. How does did that collaborative process work, and how did you choose that illustrator, and I'm just wondering how all the different collaborative processes worked in coming up with this book.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Yeah, I can speak to the logistics of it. So, we had these conversations around the time I was 16 and then we got into the writing process. I left to go to Montreal for my undergrad around the time, like around midway through when we were doing this writing, so the way it would usually work would be you, my dad would write up a draft, a draft page, and then send it over to me. I would make changes, suggestions, usually to do with the dialogue itself but we also discussed the translation a little, as well, and then that would go back and forth a few times before we sent it over to Dushen, who is just an amazing illustrator, and I think you'll see his illustrations in a minute. Then, he would get back to us because there were real challenges that writers don't really think about when it comes to page layout for illustrators, so he would say, okay, we need less dialogue on this because it just won't fit on this side of the page, stuff like that, and so that would be another back and forth, and we just went page by page, story by story until we came to a conclusion.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Dushen is an amazing guy, like sort of a --- of our time, I think. He lived in Canada for 20 years but he's back in Belgrade now, and he is more or less taking on the, you know, the kind of tyrannical authority in the country every week with his cartoons. He's a real, he's just a really soulful guy, and he just fit right in. It was kind of remarkable, and I think he captured us, and what we've got now, I mean, I'm not big on photographs. Gideon is great with it, but what we've got with Gideon, with Dushen's illustrations is a sort of graphic representation of our relationship at many different ages. It's a treasure.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Yeah, it's one of the things I actually am amazed that you guys, I don't know if you can see, but you really do look a lot like the little, like there's, some of them are very like little tiny sketches of the comic book like characters but he really captured your resemblance, and I'm just like, wow, it's really them. So, yeah, I think he did a great job.

I think we'll go on to, we'll go back to Sidura. We had a, we asked about, we talked about Isaac. Maybe we'll go on to talk about, maybe you could talk about the theme a little bit.

In Love Story Never Told, Saul lies about how he met his wife and embellishes on the story to get a deeper truth about love. How does the story about lies and embellishment reflect on the larger narrative arc of the story, and is the whole collection a form of embellishment to get some sort of deeper truth, and what truth do you think the stories in your collection are getting at, if, using that little story as an example for your collection.

>> SIDURA LUDWIG: I have not thought about my collection in that way, so thank you for posing that question. Is the, okay, is the, can you go back to the first part of the question?

>> NATHAN ADLER: Yeah, sure. So, in Love Story Never Told, Saul's grandfather, he met his wife and then he's embellishing the story about how they met, and he's really telling this grandiose sweeping love story to tell the story about, the truth is that he deeply loved his wife and that the truth of the story is that despite how much he's embellishing and making these elaborate, grand stories about his love for his wife, and they're all lies, but the truth is about how much he loved his wife, and then I saw that one story, I was thinking of that one story, okay, well what are these other stories? They're all embellishments, they're all lies, like they're lies but they're fiction, so like what, what is the truth behind those stories, those embellishments, I guess.

>> SIDURA LUDWIG: That makes me, yeah, that makes me think about perspective and how, and how we pass stories down. The other, the other aspect of that particular story is the way that it's structured, first draft, second draft, edited as the story gets passed along, as the grandfather's story gets passed along in that story, and it, and it changes the number in terms of the people who are involved in their own desire of what they want to hear. I think that, I think as writers, I think we're doing that all the time. I mean, you know, on the surface I could say, well, it's fiction, so, you know, so, so all fiction is lies that try to get at a truth, but if I think about how, how family stories are passed down, and even today I was telling a story to someone from, from my family's past that's been passed down to me and I realized as I was telling it I couldn't be sure if what I was telling was truth. I could be sure that it was the story that I had heard. I could be sure that the essence of that story was, is how I wanted to portray it, but, you know, if someone from the generation above me was in the room they would probably jump in and say, no, no, no, you haven't got that right, and how many of us have that

happen all the time? So, there's, yes, so there's the, there's that element of, does it really matter if the facts are right, if the essence of the story is, you know, an expression of love, or the essence of the story is an expression of loss and grief and how one deals with all of those. Are the, you know, if this, if the book has been told from the grandmother's perspective or from Eva's perspective, how might those stories have changed? But then at the end of the day, it, you know, does it really matter because it's really about, you know, this family and how they deal and how the losses in their lives have affected the way that they move forward.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Okay. Interesting. Yeah, I just like, I just saw, I thought that story was like really saying something about the whole collection almost in some way, getting at, like, I was like thinking, what does it mean for the whole story, for the whole collection? Maybe I was reading too deeply into that one story, but I think I'm going, moving on. I think I'll ask Nessa another question.

So, there seems to be some sort of generational comparison between the sisters in this book, so I was wondering how you saw the rivalry between Nana and her sister and her sister reflecting on the main narrative. This is similar to the previous question that I asked Sidura that the relationship between Nana and her sister and then is the older generation and then Eve and Tam are the new generation and those two generations of sisters, do they fall into different patterns or similar patterns? Do you see them as rising above or resolving the problems that the previous generations had with each other, or is it more about Eve and Nana and their way, the way the idea of sisterhood itself impacted their relationship?

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: Well, this book is not autobiographical except in the profound sense that everything one writes is revealing, but I am the eldest of three sisters. They're, I'm sure all very grateful they do not appear in this book, but I'm fascinated by sisters. We're four sisters and no brothers within six years, and anyone who has a sister knows it's a thing and anyone who doesn't, for example, my mother was one girl of five, she always longed for sisters, and I wanted to capture the intimacy of sisters where you actually know everything about them in some ways that's almost not verbal. You know they have a scent and you know what they care about and you, there's so much antennae about growing up in relation to sisters, but I also wanted to, and of course I wanted to get the complexity of love, rivalry, comparisons, which is almost impossible to avoid in a family, but I was equally intrigued by the difference between how sisters experienced their own relationship and how it looks on the outside because Tam, the sister who has died, is, was hugely ambitious from the day she was born. She is in the novel Canada's most famous TV journalist. Eve is almost deliberately indeterminate. She's endlessly working on her PhD about British women writers between the wars. It drives Tam crazy that she can't land herself. I'm fascinated by women's ambitions, so I was really intrigued by that contrast, but what was most interesting to me is that the people who come to shiva make the automatic

assumption that because Tam was famous and she was, had a devoted husband and lived in a beautiful old house in Toronto with two lovely children, of course Eve was always jealous of her, but Eve is, I know Eve very well now, she was never jealous of her sister. She says she isn't, and I believe her, and in the course of the novel one of the meanings of the title it has Eve's name in it but it's also about an evening out between two sisters from how they experience themselves on the inside to what actually happens to them. I've always been intrigued by this expression that I think comes from AA. Never compare your insides to somebody else's outsides, so while everybody is looking at Eve, and Tam did, too, in a certain way, Eve really loves her life and she's at peace.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Interesting. I like how you talk about your like, trying to get that dynamic between sisters, for sure. I really picked up on that for sure. I thought maybe this would be a good place to ask for a reading since --

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: Sure, I'm going to read about the same amount that Sidura read, and I just want to do a tiny introduction because I'm throwing you into the beginning of the book.

As I said, it's a novel about two sisters in their 30s and their secrets. Eve has come home to Toronto to mourn the very premature death of her sister, Tam, who is only 38, and this is the opening of the book because, as I said, there's so many secrets that arise in the book that if I don't, if I read any place past the opening I'm going to spoil the secret sequence.

One loves, the other is loved: so Nana taught us. I look at the beautiful bones of her face and speculate about this pronouncement. My grandmother has always been beloved, and so my grandfather, long dead, assumes a peculiar poignancy. Once, in some rapturous, unimaginable youth before she married, Nana was the ardent lover. But no one is alive to tell us about the object of her affection, and she will not disclose his name.

We are sitting in the living room of my mother's house, waiting for the funeral to begin. Outside, the sky is the eerie pewter I remember from our childhood, lightless even at midday. In this room six years ago, before our mother recovered the furniture yet again, Tam and I were laughing at the weather. Then, too, it was noon when I realized after her baby's naming ceremony was over and the last guests had straggled out, that the day would not improve. To quote, Tam: "This is it."

I had fled to New York, whose winters are tamed by the city's determination to outwit the seasons. Tam not only stayed in Toronto, betraying our pact to leave the minute we could, but choose a profession that forced her to rise most mornings at four in order to be on the air. For her, the half year of darkness is permanent, I think to myself. And then think: Permanent darkness.

Paralyzed, I stare at Nana, imploring her to rescue me, but she is stoic, not emitting whatever feeling she no doubt has. The fact is, my sister, her eldest grandchild, is

dead. The silence in this room is not the anticipatory hush preceding a family celebration but the void of what cannot be accommodated.

"Tam."

In speaking my sister's name, I have invaded Nana's solitude. I look at her carefully and observe, even in the somber room, that the skin beneath her eyes is gleaming. No one has seen my grandmother cry.

"Laurence is coming," I state, more bluntly than intended.

Nana's lip draw into a pucker of distaste. Once again Eve has said the wrong thing. Why doesn't my admiration of my grandmother offset her reservations about me?

I'm stopping here, not only because my time is up but because the next sentence is an erotic musing of Eve, and, although I wrote it, I'm still skittish about reading it out loud.

>> NATHAN ADLER: There's quite a few erotic musings in this book.

>> NESSA RAPOPORT: I know, I have a couple of very, very old people in my life who love me and can't read anymore so they listen to it by audio, and a wonderful Canadian actress read it but when I imagine them hearing it out loud, I'm, wow.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Okay, great. Thank you for that reading. I really love hearing the author's voice in my head so I can finally put the author's kind of intonation and stuff to the text.

So, my next question is for Rick and Gideon. So, I was wondering, the book is very much about this father-son relationship between Rick and Gideon, and I was wondering how you think that the father-son relationship in the book reflects or parallels or diverges from the way that the God-human relationship develops and changes over the course of the bible stories or parallels them. There's this metaphor of God is the parent.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Big question.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Um, yeah. I guess the one thing that occurs to me is one thing we discuss in the book is how central God is at the beginning of the bible of Genesis and how he recedes over time, which I always considered a really kind of beautiful humble act, right, to sort of recede from your own universe and leave room for your creation. That's as close as I can come to an answer on that metaphor, though. I think it's part of every, like the experience or job of every parent to sort of go through that and watch yourself recede in importance, at least from your own perception as your kid gets older, and I'd like to think that God struggled with that. Who wouldn't, right? Do you have anything to add?

>> RICK SALUTIN: There's a lovely dynamic that came out just when we were talking about the stories, like, some of the stories at the beginning of Genesis, and Gideon would say, well, God's a real dick in this story, and we would talk about it, but I think, also, you know, I mean, every parent is a real dick at certain times, so that's part of the dynamic, too. It was a wonderful way to, you know, I think you spotted something I hadn't been aware was there, Nathan.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Yeah, because there was like, there was some like, I never have seen anyone like point out, like, oh God's really acting terrible here, and it's like, oh, yeah, he's really like a wrathful God here, and then ---

>> RICK SALUTIN: This had to do with the fact that Gideon didn't have a formal Jewish upbringing, so he came to it fresh. I'm prepared to be an iconoclast, there's lots of iconoclasts, but we're all, but if you've been immersed in the tradition, as well, it's harder to just go right at it.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Alright. Well, yeah, I just thought it was a very interesting parallel between the father, son and then the God-human relationship.

>> RICK SALUTIN: You nailed it. I didn't ---

>> NATHAN ADLER: I'm trying to wrap my head around the whole like, the book is doing something there, I couldn't quite put it together, so it's interesting ---

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Neither can we, apparently.

>> NATHAN ADLER: It's doing something. But anyway, I think this is a good place to ask for a reading from you two.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Do you want to share that JPEG that you have? Thank you. So, we're discussing the biblical story from Genesis. This is the rape of Dinah. Dinah, they just, actually do you want to sum it up?

>> RICK SALUTIN: Sure. It's a part of Genesis. It's not well known. I doubt that any bar mitzvah kid ever was given this one to read, but there is actually rape. The daughter of Jacob is raped by one of the leaders of a local town in Canaan and her brothers take revenge by basically slaughtering the entire population of the town and plundering it, so it's a bit of a shocking story that a lot of people don't hear. So, we have, so we go, you know, there's the text and then we have this dialogue around it.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Holy crap.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Yeah.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: How did they teach you this when you were a kid?

>> RICK SALUTIN: They didn't.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: She never speaks. She has no say. Her family acts for her.

>> RICK SALUTIN: It's primitive payback. Families used to avenge their own. Eventually Moses comes along in the bible and gives laws to make it more just.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: When the legal system fails, do you act anyway? That's still the issue. Besides, acting for Dinah without her consent just magnifies her silence and that kind of silence can lead to more rape.

>> RICK SALUTIN: But they do support her. They don't say she 'provoked' it.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Yeah, they support her in that sense.

>> RICK SALUTIN: And it doesn't condone rape, at least not their sister's.

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: What's wrong is the sexism behind a rape gets reinforced by her silence. Things won't ever change if that remains. It's like the guy at the airport in Israel said.

>> RICK SALUTIN: Same problems?

>> GIDEON SALUTIN: Same problems.

>> RICK SALUTIN: And that's a quick reference to an earlier place when we go to Israel. I've returned to Israel after having not been there for, I don't know, 40 years or more, and the guy at customs says, how long have you been away? When was your last visit, and I said 1962 or something, and he said, and you never came back? I said, why, has anything changed, and the customs guy said, nah, same problems.

>> NATHAN ADLER: Yeah, that's a nice little, shows how you have this commentary and really the insight into these stories throughout the conversations between you and Gideon, and I just really love the, the insight that you bring to it and also the little relationship in the stories that are woven all the way around. They're really, they're actually kind of beautiful and funny in many places.

Mary, who how are we doing for time? I can ask more questions, but I'm wondering how we're doing for time. I prepared like many questions, so like I can --

>> MARY ANDERSON: As much as I would love to keep this going, I feel like my face is going to hit the screen soon, I'm so captivated here, I think we should probably wrap this up, but this has been an awesome conversation, and thank you so much, Nathan, Sidura, Nessa, Rick, Gideon. This was absolutely wonderful.