



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2021 Book Awards Keynote Roundtable

The Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards are presented annually to three outstanding scholarly books published in the United States. The 2021 winners are Jenn Shapland for *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers*; Sarah Stewart Johnson for *The Sirens of Mars: Searching for Life on Another World*; and Alice Baumgartner for *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War*. During the ceremony, the authors shared their thought process that sparked their ideas, found commonality in courage, and reflected on the moments that spurred them on to pursue the work we honored.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholar schedule, please visit pbk.org.

This special episode, featuring our 2021 Phi Beta Kappa book award winners, was taped at the annual Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards event, which took place virtually on December 8th, 2021. I hope you'll enjoy the conversation that we had with our three extraordinary book award winners. For the first time ever, each honoree is a first time author.

We always hold this event at around the time of the founding of Phi Beta Kappa, December 5th, 1776, which means last Sunday was our 245th birthday. In some ways

that's a great measure all by itself, but also in some ways it starts the run up now for our 250th anniversary, along with the nation's in 2026. So it's a birthday celebration in part. And when we celebrate at Phi Beta Kappa, what else will we do? We celebrate talking about books and we celebrate books and we have three great books to celebrate tonight. We are delighted to have our three recipients, each of whom is a first time author. I believe that's the first time that's ever happened. The first prize is the Christian Gauss Award. The Christian Gauss Award is the oldest of our prizes. It was established in 1950 by the Phi Beta Kappa Senate, and it was established to honor the late Christian Gauss. Christian Gauss was a distinguished scholar, administrator and teacher at Princeton.

The winning title for the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Award is *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* by Jenn Shapland, published by Tin House Books. Jenn Shapland has given us a dual autobiography, a biography of a much misremembered Carson McCullers and a memoir of her own journey of discovery and self discovery. McCullers is one of America's most beloved writers. As we learn from this wonderful book, our understanding of McCullers tells us as much about ourselves, as it tells us about the writer herself. At stake here are issues of identity, queerness, memory, obsession and above all love.

What and how and who we read makes us who we are. Jenn Shapland is a writer and archivist living in New Mexico. *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* is her first book. You're going to hear that a lot tonight. It was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award and won the 2021 Lambda Literary Award. Jenn has a PhD in English from the University of Texas at Austin, where her dissertation, *Narrative Salvage*, focused on waste scapes in contemporary literature. She currently works as an archivist for a visual artist. Please join me in congratulating Jenn Shapland, the winner of this year's Christian Gauss Award.

Jenn Shapland: Thank you. Thank you so much, Fred. I wrote this book while I, as you just said, while I was writing a separate academic dissertation on a different subject. So I never quite felt like my little meditation on Carson McCullers and lesbian invisibility and queer identity necessarily fit into a category like literary criticism or scholarship or even biography or memoir. It was always similar in between all of those. So it means a lot to me that you've selected my book for the Christian Gauss Award. Since the book came out, I've had the chance to visit classes who've read it and it's been wonderful to see how this more personal approach to an author's life can impact the way students connect to literature.

So I really appreciate being recognized in an academic context, it's exciting for me. I'm grateful to my publisher Tin House, my editor, Emma Komlos-Hrobsky, my agent, Bill Clegg and the whole team at Tin House who helped publish the book. I couldn't have written this book without the support of the Carson McCullers Center for Musicians and Writers in Columbus, Georgia, the Vermont Studio Center and Yato, all of whom housed

me and supported this work. It's just such an honor to coexist with the other two awardees tonight and their brilliant books. So thank you so much.

Lawrence: Congratulations, Jenn. The next award is the Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science that was created in 1959 to encourage literate and scholarly interpretations of the physical and biological sciences and mathematics. The winning title of the Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science for 2021 is *The Sirens of Mars: Searching for Life on Another World* by Sarah Stewart Johnson published by Crown. Who hasn't stared up at the night and seen that one twinkling red star and wondered what is going on up there? It turns out that Mars was once similar to earth, but today there are no rivers, no lakes, no oceans. Coated in red dust, the terrain is bewilderingly empty. Multiple spacecrafts have circled and even landed on Mars, exploring its strange surface, perhaps on the brink of a staggering find. Sarah Stewart Johnson has written a deeply personal story of how she and other researchers have scoured Mars for signs of life.

Trust me, when you finish this book, you will never look up at the night sky the same way. Sarah Stewart Johnson is Provost, Distinguished Associate Professor of Biology at Georgetown University here in Washington DC, and an Associate Professor in the Science, Technology and International Affairs program at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. Her lab seeks to understand the presence and preservation of biosignatures within planetary environments and is involved in the implementation of planetary exploration, analyzing data from current spacecraft, as well as devising new techniques for future missions. A former Rhodes Scholar and White House Fellow, she received her PhD from MIT and has worked on NASA's Spirit, Opportunity and Curiosity rovers. She's also a visiting scientist with the planetary environmental lab at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. Congratulations Sarah, on this marvelous achievement.

Sarah Stewart Johnson:

Oh Fred. Thank you. Thank you so much. I'm just, I just feel tremendously honored and especially to be recognized alongside Alice and Jenn. I feel like I am completely in awe of the two of them and I'm not sure I belong on this stage, but it's really hard for me to express just how tremendously meaningful this is. I'm a scientist but I've been enthralled with language my whole life, even when I was this little kid I was scribbling around and there's this part of myself that I've always, I don't know, I've just always really loved to write, but I'd only really written in this technical capacity until really recently and so much of my day to day life is data and there's this very technical way of looking at this problem but what I do, what I focus on as a professor and as a scientist, is the search for life beyond Earth.

And there's so many things about that search that I feel will never find expression on the pages of scientific journals. And I guess that's how this book came about but so just thank you. And of course, you never read a book alone, you get all this help. And so of

course my editor Amanda held my hand the whole time and Jill, my agent and all of my dear, dear friends who just listened to all of these conversations just all the time, like does this paragraph sound okay? Is this working? And of course my family, I want to thank them as well.

Lawrence: Congratulations Sarah. The last and most recent of our three prizes is named for the great Ralph Waldo Emerson, forever associated with Phi Beta Kappa for delivering the American Scholar address as the Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard. We like to remind people that Emerson was in fact, not elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa as an undergraduate but did become an honorary member, and the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award was created in 1960, to recognize studies that contribute significantly to historical, philosophical or religious interpretations of the human condition. The winner of the Phi Beta Kappa Ralph Waldo Emerson Award for this year is *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War* by Alice Baumgartner, published by Basic Books. Most of us have been inspired, I think, by stories of the underground railroad up through the Northern part of the United States and on into Canada.

But it turns out that thousands of people in the South Central United States escaped slavery, not by heading North, but by crossing the Southern border into Mexico where slavery had been abolished in 1837. Alice Baumgartner sheds new light on this story, examining why Mexico abolished slavery and how its increasingly radical anti-slavery policies fueled the sectional crisis in the United States. Reconstructing that story and its forgotten significance to the story of the peculiar institution of slavery in the United States took her to 28 archives in three different countries. As we seek to expand our understanding of slavery of antebellum America and the causes of the American Civil War, *South to Freedom* will be an indispensable guide. Alice Baumgartner teaches history at the University of Southern California. She received a BA in history from Yale College and an MPhil in Latin American studies from the University of Oxford where she was a Rhodes Scholar. She earned her PhD from Yale in 2018. Congratulations Alice on opening a new vista of a story that we thought we knew all there was to know about and it turned out we didn't know even half.

Alice Baumgartner:

Thank you so much Fred and Peter and to the selection committees for these awards, I'm just so honored to receive this recognition and to share it with Jenn and Sarah. I was something of a dilettante in college and that I was a one time environmental science major, a one time English major. And so reading Sarah's book, I was just so amazed at how beautifully written it was while at the same time being based in science that I, at least from afar, know is very complicated in its own right and to be able to do both of those is really just astonishing to me. And then my book was based on my dissertation and I felt like just writing that one book was difficult enough. To have Jenn write a

dissertation and this really amazing book is really just, I'm so honored to be on this call with both of you.

I love reading essays about writing. And one of my favorites, perhaps no surprise for a 19th century historian, is by the German Jewish intellectual Ludwig Borne, which was written in 1832. It's called *How to Become an Original Writer in Three Days*. And he was joking about the 19th century fads for how to do something in a short amount of time, and it's a funny little essay that has a lot of little gems of wisdom in it. One of them I think is the line that goes, the good writer follows the same path as the bad writer. Only the good writer follows it a little bit longer. And I've been accompanied on that path by so many people. I want to start by just saying how much this book and my own writerly journey has been influenced by my own students, some of whom I know are in the audience, and it just means the world to me that you're here.

And I've also benefited so much from my own teachers from David Blight and Johnny Federer who advised this as a dissertation to Patty Limerick who welcomed me at the University of Colorado when I was finishing the first draft of this dissertation, to my editor at Basic, Brian Distelberg, and the whole staff there was just so helpful. And then finally to one person who had no institutional affiliation with me and nonetheless just donated so much of his time to not just talk to me through ideas but also to edit this manuscript, Peter Wood, who's an Emeritus Professor of History from Duke University and who read very closely two almost complete drafts of this manuscript. And I really couldn't, I wouldn't be here without all of those people who helped me along the way. So thank you so much to all of you and to Phi Beta Kappa more generally. Thanks.

Lawrence: All three of you very graciously thanked Peter and me, but I have to give the credit where it's due. Our thanks to the members of the prize committees, who volunteer their time to read many books, the long list, the short list and then make their decisions. So thank you to all of you. I think we have many if not all of the members of those committees who are listening and it must be a great joy for all of you to see now it's come to this and to meet these three wonderful prize winning first time authors. So let's jump in and talk a little bit about how it came to be, all of these books, and you all alluded to this a little bit.

Donald Murray famously said that all writing is autobiography. By the way, he also said, remembering may be a celebration or it may be a dagger in the heart but it is better, far better than forgetting. So I leave you that as well as possible motivation for tonight. But if all writing is somewhat autobiographical, then I'd like to start with each of you, how you got drawn to your topics and whether there's some autobiography in it? And obviously Jenn, I have to start with you on this one. You have the audaciousness to title the book, *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers: A Memoir*. So it's about her, it's about you. It's about you discovering her. Did you find McCullers or did McCullers find you?

Shapland: That's a good question. Well, I was not super familiar with McCullers' work when I was a grad student, I hadn't really gotten to her. In my research I was focused on contemporary authors and I was working in the archive at University of Texas, the Harry Ransom Center where McCullers papers are housed. I was there as an intern just fielding queries from established scholars on their work, and one of them asked for some letters between Carson and a woman named Annemarie. So I go down to the basement and find these letters and instead of just bringing them up and photographing them and sending them to the scholar, I started reading them and they were love letters. They were so enthralling. They were hilarious. They were so interesting. And I just wanted to know everything about these two women.

And at that time in my life, I was in the process of slowly coming out as a queer woman. So it meant a lot to me to see this very well known literary figure, who was in a relationship that looked super familiar to me but that I hadn't really seen depicted so much in literature. So who found who? I'm not totally sure but I definitely pursued Carson from there on. I ended up cataloging her clothes and personal effects at the Ransom Center, as I talk about in the book and then really sensed that there was more to her story, specifically more to her autobiography than I had been able to find.

She kept trying to write her autobiography throughout her life in different ways and never finished it. So I really wanted to find what was the story that she was trying to tell? What version of her life did she really want out there? Because it was a story that she returned to over and over again. So that's how the title came about, was that it was sort of me searching for her autobiography but then along the way, my own story gets woven in there as well. So yeah, it was a mutual exchange.

Lawrence: Tell us about how you thought of how you situated yourself with the other biographies that had been written of McCullers. Because obviously when you write in an area, it's not just that you have to do the literature search, it's that you're taking your place in that scholarly conversation. How did you think about that?

Shapland: Sure. There are two big biographies of McCullers out there and the Virginia Carr biography is the completest version, the one that includes almost like a TikTok of her life, every moment accounted for to the best of the biographer's ability. And then there's a more lyrical biography that was written by a French woman in 2000. But what frustrated me about both of those books and about the narratives about McCullers' life that had been rehearsed in literary criticism was that if they acknowledged her relationships with women, like her relationship with Annemarie, they glossed over them. They didn't really treat them like serious parts of her life. Whereas when I was reading her attempts at autobiography and then ultimately when I was reading her therapy transcripts, it

became apparent that she saw her life much differently and saw her relationships in a much different light.

So whereas the biographies positioned her as someone in a tortured marriage with Reeves McCullers throughout her life and that was her primary relationship, she saw it differently. She even wanted the Annemarie letters to be included in her autobiography when it was published, which they didn't actually include. So my relationship to the biographies was sensing that there was something missing, that there was an aspect to her story that even while it's being disclosed, isn't being given the benefit of clear language, it was euphemized or it was dismissed. And so I really wanted to understand that part of her life better and then write in that direction.

Lawrence: Sarah, I'm tempted to ask you a very similar question. Did you find Mars or did Mars find you? But you wrote about Mars exploration quite evocatively. You say that the exploration of Mars has always been about more than scientific knowledge. It's been an almost existential endeavor to confront our own limitations, to learn what life really is and ultimately to defy our own isolation in the universe. So could that be said about exploration of space generally, about other planets, or is something about the Martian relationship with earth that is unique and compelling this way?

Johnson: Oh, it's a great question, Fred. There is something in many ways that's very special about Mars. We know of no other place, even of all of the extraordinary worlds that we've now discovered orbiting other stars, in addition to our own solar system, no other place that's as similar as Earth. And of course, Mars and Earth were almost like twins. When life was getting started here early in our history and this planet took this dramatically different path than our own. But the thing that has been so captivating for me about it, there's so many worlds that are beautiful and amazing and we just get bowled over by the indescribable foreignness of them all but just this possibility for life on Mars. We know that life got started here, did it get started there as well?

And it just seems like it gives us this way of going after these really fundamental questions, like, are we alone? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Why is there something and not nothing? And did that something come from nothing, did it happen once or did it happen time and again? And we potentially have an answer within our grasp: Mars, just the next planet over. If we happen to find life there, especially a separate genesis of life. If lightning struck twice, if we have another spark, it just would be so suggestive that our whole universe could be just this hatchery, all kinds of worlds and all kinds of different possibilities. But I guess when I think about it, it just seems like we've got this one data point and all the life that we know of, it's the same life. It's carbon based. It's DNA based. It's just the same life and just has a second data point. I just think it would just be the most incredible discovery in the history of modern science.

Lawrence: You come to life talking about this and I sense your excitement and devotion to it. Do you remember a moment when that started, do you remember a moment of thinking if I can swing it, this is what I want to do, I want to be able to study this?

Johnson: Oh, I do. So there were certainly seeds of this early in my childhood, my father was a bit of an amateur astronomer and an amateur geologist. My mother also had just this insatiable curiosity around the natural world. I grew up in Kentucky and didn't really travel very often beyond the state line, and then I went off to Missouri, to Washington University in St. Louis for college. My freshman year I had the chance to meet a Mars scientist, this man named Ray Arvidson, and he became a professor in a class and I started working in his research laboratory and it just blew my mind that there could be people that spent their whole lives just thinking about Mars.

I do remember this moment, I was off doing field work in Hawaii, up at the top of this volcano and it was just so cool and interesting, and I remember being so far beyond the treeline, there was just no life. I mean, it was just like everything looked like a crystallized bruise, it was black and shards of purple and cinder cones. And all of a sudden, I remember seeing this tiny little fern up there that was surviving against all odds, it's a little moment I write about in the book at one point. But it's just, it just seemed like it stood for all of us. It's just this defiance against the abyss there and just this resilience of life, I just found so powerful. But I think that was the moment that it first made sense to me that I want to be a planetary scientist.

Lawrence: And Alice, I guess I can't ask you whether you found this topic or found you, but I do want to ask you something similar to it. It's not the most obvious topic. Even those of us who think we have read a lot or know a lot about the civil war and slavery and the process of emancipation, slow and still continuing in some ways. And yet this is a story that I guess, has been hiding in plain sight. So, two related questions, how did you see it where others hadn't and why hadn't we seen it?

Baumgartner: Those are both great questions. I came across this topic almost by complete accident. I actually started as a Mexicanist and in my first research trip to Northern Mexico and Mexico City, I was working on a topic about violence on the US-Mexico border in the mid 19th century and really trying to understand what was happening on the border after it had been delineated but before either government really had much power on the border. And so I was looking for any document about violent conflict and I was just shocked at how many documents I happened upon that had to do with slaveholders from the United States coming to Mexico, trying to kidnap enslaved people who had escaped there and then facing really surprising resistance, not just from those enslaved people themselves but from Mexican citizens. And that really surprised me, not just because I had no idea that enslaved people were escaping to Mexico; I wouldn't have

expected Mexican citizens and Mexican officials to risk their lives to protect enslaved people.

But it really challenged what seemed and still seems to me to be a predominant explanation in history that people among historical scholarship, I should say, that people act according to pretty basic economic incentives. And here was an example of people not really acting the way we would expect them to. And so it took me into this rabbit hole of why were enslaved people escaping to Mexico? What types of lives were they able to forge themselves there? And why were Mexican people helping them? And the second question of why this story has been overlooked is a complex one. Part of the issue, I think, is that if you start in Texas archives, much of what you will find will say that the promise of freedom in Mexico was illusory. That really isn't surprising given that the people who were producing those documents were often themselves either enslavers or fully committed to that system.

By dismissing Mexican anti-slavery, it was shoring up their own ideas about how slavery was not just a necessary evil but a positive good. It also had this additional benefit of perhaps dissuading enslaved people from taking the risky escape to Mexico. And so I think a lot of historians heard about this and there are some very good articles about it but a lot saw it as a really a small local story that didn't have broader significance for understandings of slavery and freedom in North America more generally. And it really, I think the fact that I started as a Mexicanist really helped to show me documents early on that really challenged that predominant narrative.

Lawrence: There's almost, it's a strange analogy, I grant you but there's almost a Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead aspect to it that the main story is going on back in the continental United States because we all know "that's where the real action is". And then there's the side story and you say, "Well, I want to talk about the side story." And the side story seems to be actually deeply connected with the main story. So talk to us a little bit about the legal landscape of the institution of slavery in Mexico and how that interacted with the American institution in the antebellum period.

Baumgartner: I was very surprised to find that Mexico abolished slavery in 1837, well in advance of the United States, elected its first president of African descent in 1829, well before the United States did too. It passed a constitution in 1857 that not only committed itself again to the abolition of slavery, but promised freedom to all enslaved people from the moment they set foot on Mexican soil, which was more radical than what was being passed in the northern states, more radical than what was being passed even in Canada, really only Haiti had passed similar types of laws. That had profound consequences for slavery in the United States and not just in the neighboring states of Texas and Louisiana, but at the very heart of the union because the US-Mexico war marked the first time in US history that the United States stood to acquire and ultimately did acquire territory

where slavery had been explicitly abolished. They had never actually had to deal with that problem before, and the fact that Mexico had abolished slavery posed real threats to the expansion of slavery all the way to the Pacific.

Lawrence: Let me shift from the books to somewhat more personal career type questions. Alice, I want to ask you something that we describe a lot in programs that we do on campus or a national program that we have as part of helping Phi Beta Kappa members or students in the liberal arts transition to different kinds of careers, and one of the things we always talk about is that it's not linear, this business of planning careers. That you may start out one place and end up in another place, or as I've told students, it may look like a straight line in retrospect but it's got a lot of zigs and zags when you're living it or put somewhat more philosophically, as Kierkegaard said, "Life has to be lived forward and understood backward." Trying to understand it backwards, what were the zigs and zags? And if that's not enough to ask, what would you advise and you probably do this, how would you advise a group of undergraduates about career planning with your experiences in mind?

Baumgartner: Oh, there were so many zigs and zags. I in college was very unsure of what I wanted to do and even what I wanted to study, which what I said at the beginning, might give you some indication of that I was interested in so many different things and wanted to pursue all of them and ended up being a history major, partly because it seemed to be the discipline that would allow me to do everything but there's a history of everything and so then you could study everything as a result of it. But I didn't think that I wanted to keep pursuing history because it seemed interesting but not important, and I felt this responsibility to try to use the amazing education I had gotten towards making the world a better place. And so after I graduated from college, I went to rural Bolivia and I worked at a free medical clinic there thinking that maybe I would want to go into nonprofit work or public health or become a doctor.

And the region where I was in Bolivia happened to be right near the site of this very destructive war in the 1930s. And my patients who were incredibly sick, in many cases incredibly poor, found out that I had studied history and started telling me their family stories about this war, and it was the beginning of the realization that the stories we tell about ourselves and the history that we understand about ourselves is really, really important. And I tell that story to students a lot because I think it's a good reminder that you never know where things will take you. You might go somewhere or take some class thinking that it will give X and instead it'll give you Y. I went to Bolivia thinking that I was going to find out what career in public health I wanted and instead it turned me back to history.

Lawrence: Jenn, you're writing about McCullers' own challenges of discovery and self discovery, of course are so powerful and so overwhelming, and I wonder not just what do we learned from her but what you learned from her because she is obviously navigating these

questions of queer identity at a time when it can't be easy. You describe this wonderful, terrible, terrifying moment when her sister Rita decides she's going to out her to their parents and her father, I guess trying to be helpful, says that sister, what they called Carson, sister is a beautiful person, and you would do well to be like her. So she couldn't possibly be a lesbian because she's... And so he means it as a compliment, so that's her world that she's navigating through. What are we meant to learn by how she navigated it? And if I may, what did you learn about how she navigated it?

Shapland: Yeah, that moment is so heartbreaking and it goes to something that I talk about in terms of biographies and in terms of the time that Carson lived, that the response to, especially for women to queer identity, to any suggestion of it was just denial. Just like, no, it's not real. No, it doesn't exist. No, it's not there. And so that's really what her dad is doing in that moment, is just saying like, "Whatever that is, it's not here, we're not going to talk about it. We're not going to recognize it as a legitimate thing." And so that's why I start the book with this conversation Carson has with her then boyfriend Reeves about her identity, where he asks her point blank, if she's a lesbian.

And she says, she doesn't say no, she says, "I don't know, what is that? What are they like? What do they do?" Because she's at this moment in time where she has no reference point whatsoever, she's grown up in a small town in the south and this is an identity that's never been made available to her. It's a category that's never even existed in her mind. And so she grows up in this world where she knows herself to be different but she doesn't really know why or how or what that looks like or what that might mean. And so she is on this journey that takes really her whole life. It's not until she's in her forties, and she's in these therapy sessions that I read the transcripts of and talk about in the book, that she actually starts putting this to language and discovering the language. But what I take from that and what I think we can all take from that is the way that she lives her life, that the openness of that question in response to Reeves, what are they like? What do they do? Tell me about that.

And her unwillingness to ever put up with the silencing. She's always just who she is. She's always just very frank and very candid. She's never really closeting herself but people around her are constantly closeting her and her biographers after the fact are closeting her. But during her own life, she's living out loud and so that meant a great deal to me because I had been in a closeted relationship for seven years at the point when I found these letters. And so I was astonished because I'm reading about this woman who's in the thirties, forties and fifties at a time when it was basically illegal to be who she was, when her gay male friends are being arrested and she's just living out loud in this way. And it was almost like a courage that I took from her.

Lawrence: Sarah, we've been talking about Mars a long, long way away, but I want to ask you about something else you wrote, which is much closer to home, and that is that extraordinary

New Yorker piece about loss, the period that starts about something like six months before the pandemic time of just extraordinary challenge that you write very movingly in the New Yorker piece about what you learned from that, and actually what you learned from that in terms of how it applies to your professional work, your scientific work. Would you share some of that with us?

Johnson: Sure. So not terribly long before the pandemic I, I found myself in the ICU on a ventilator with no sedation because my blood pressure was too low, but there'd been this medical accident. And I ended up just fighting for my life, which was so interesting and awful but it was something that I just completely didn't expect. I do work, field work in these really remote places, far flung corners of earth. And there are these known risks and you know about them and I just, I'm always so careful but I just never thought just on a Monday morning that I would come so close to dying. Following this loss, I'd been pregnant actually with two babies and we'd lost them both.

And then I just halfway through the pregnancy and then during the surgery that followed, there was an artery that had been unseen, that had been nicked and I just, I had liters of blood pooling in my abdomen and it just, I don't know, this is all too graphic. But anyway, the point being, I guess, is that I just came very, very, very close and in those hours I just was really on the edge. But in this strange way where I was also very aware that I was maybe going to die any second. And then it was just this thing that I had, there were all these postoperative complications, I was just back in the emergency room again and again, all fall. And it didn't really stop until right before the pandemic, which was an interesting thing.

Because everything quieted down and had a lot of time to think about what had happened and just the nature of our own lives around mortality. And I think that what I wrote in that piece was just this idea that as a scientist in particular, you look at cause and effect, you think about how things lead to other things. And I think I had just been going about much of my feeling like there was this rhyme and reason to things and you just need to understand it. That's your role as a scientist, you go after understanding things and there's this sense behind it all but there's also this role of chance where just by chance, something can happen and it's just so much, it's shaped so much of not only the history of our universe and the fact that we all come to be but then also these individual moments in our lives.

Well, I think it just has left me with this very strong sense of how fragile things are. And it's so interesting as somebody that studies life and has just always thought of life as, it just led us into a crevasse and holds on against all odds. I mean, life can survive in the core of a nuclear reactor. It can survive a mile under the earth. It could survive in ice covered lakes. I mean just all kinds of crazy conditions and the coldest temperatures you can imagine but life at the same time is just fundamentally fragile too.

Lawrence: I said to each of you, when I notified you of winning your respective book award, that one of the things that I try to do in these conversations is find the common thread. And I said, the thing reveals itself. It's not always clear. I think courage, that's the common thread. Life persevering is courage, enslaved people finding their way to Mexico of all places and trying to build a life there, is a story about courage. Carson McCullers is a story about courage. I think that's our through line here in a way that might not have been obvious reading these books A to Z but hearing your descriptions of them, I think that's what comes through quite powerfully and quite compellingly. Samuel Beckett said, "Try again, fail again, fail better."

And maybe that is the definition of courage. Try again, fail again but fail better each time. No failures tonight. Only successes tonight. Thank you for being with us. Thank you for the wonderful words you put on the screen and the page for us all to learn and benefit from. You're all first time authors, which means no pressure but we're all anxiously waiting to see what comes next. I'm sure you are too. I know there are projects underway. The world will be better for all of it. Congratulations on behalf of a very grateful Phi Beta Kappa Society. And for all of you with us tonight, thank you for being with us to the 2021 Book Award celebration. And we will look forward to gathering in 2022.

This podcast is produced by LWC. Jimmy Gutierrez is managing editor, Kojin Tashiro mixed this episode and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. You can learn more about the works of our book award winners at pbk.org. You can also learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program on that site as well. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "2021 Book Awards Keynote Roundtable." *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, December 12, 2021. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

