

4th Street Convention Panel

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Casey Blair: [00:00:04] Hello, I'm Casey Blair, the programming director for 4th Street Fantasy and you are listening to our special 2020 podcast edition of 4th Street Fantasy. Our topic today is, This is Fine: Making Art While the World Burns with panelists John Wiswell, Chelsea Polk, John Chu, Maurice Broaddus and Fran Wilde. We are recording this on June 14th, 2020 so your apocalypse may vary at the time of listening. Thank you Fran, for loaning me that phrase.

[00:00:31] We are going to run this as much like a 4th Street panel as we can, so once our panelists have taken it away for a while, I or Scott Lynch will jump in at the end with a couple of audience questions. So without further ado, let's turn it over to today's moderator, John Wiswell.

John Wiswell: [00:00:44] Hello everyone. My name is John Wiswell. I'm your handy-dandy moderator. I am a writer of short stories, articles and essays. Usually somewhere in the science fiction or fantasy realm. My work has appeared in Uncanny Magazine, Fireside Magazine, Podcastle, Pseudopod. Nature Magazine. Lots of different places. And I also work part time as a coordinator for students with disabilities so I've been working a bit in the coordination against certain fires and self-care during certain fires so I'm pleased to be here today. Chelsea?

C. L. Polk: [00:01:27] Hi, I'm Chelsea. I write science fiction and fantasy under the name C. L. Polk, which is also my name, but you guys know that. I live in Calgary, Alberta and I have a deadline. And how do I put this. In the middle of my deadline, I decided that the book that I was writing was not the right book for the moment so I'm trying to write something else in response to everything being on fire and it's making me ask a lot of questions about what good am I doing as an artist? I'm feeling a little bit nihilistic.

John Wiswell: [00:02:08] Fran? Oh no.

Fran Wilde: [00:02:12] No! Chelsea's not done.

John Wiswell: [00:02:12] Chelsea, Chelsea please continue. I'm sorry.

C. L. Polk: [00:02:14] I'm sorry. I was just going to say, and that's all I have to say.

Fran Wilde: [00:02:18] Hi, I'm Fran Wilde. I write science fiction and fantasy for adults and children. My most recent novel Riverland just won the Nebula and that felt pretty amazing since I don't have any proof of that at all since it's somewhere in being shipped to me, but they tell me that happened.

[00:02:50] I 50-odd short stories in publications, including Asimov's, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Uncanny Magazine and Tor.com and in addition to running a podcast that is slightly on hiatus, but we will be back, I am the director of the Genre Fiction MFA concentration at Western Colorado University.

[00:03:16] And currently I'm finding myself in a deadline pileup much like Chelsea, but I'm the kind of person that tends to get through traumatic events by making things and somehow I feel like that has seen me through a lot. When my water heater decided on a career change and tried to turn into an assassin, my response after getting out of the house was to go and make necklaces for a while and it just felt like that was the right thing to do.

[00:03:49] I do the same sort of thing with fiction. I tend to write short stories and draw and do other things just to get through traumas small and large. In the case of recent events, however, which feel much more like a Pylon attack than anything else, it's getting harder and harder to find things to make that don't turn into work. And I think part of the joy of making things in a situation like this is just to have something that you can fiddle with until things pass.

John Wiswell: [00:04:29] Maurice?

Maurice Broaddus: [00:04:29] Yes. My name's Maurice Broaddus. I'm a science fiction and fantasy author. I have about 100 short stories published, about 12 books. My latest two books are Pimp My Airship, a steampunk novel and then The Usual Suspects, the first of my middle grade series.

Fran Wilde: [00:04:48] It's so good. I love that book.

Maurice Broaddus: [00:04:51] Thank you. I basically have three full-time jobs. One's obviously as a writer. I'm also a middle school teacher. And then I also do a lot of community... I work for a grassroots community organization. I've done that for about four or five years now, so in a lot of ways I'm like, when has the world not been on fire? And so that's kind of the way I've approached things and so I've long since found my stride when it comes to writing, let's say, under duress. So.

John Chu: [00:05:28] Okay. Hi, I'm John Chu. I'm primarily a short fiction writer. I also do Chinese to English translations, occasional podcast narrations. And I also have a day job. So I guess I could sort of put this two ways. One is that like Maurice, I'm somewhat overbooked so I'm always sort of writing under duress. But on the other hand I will say that for me, I sort of realized that for me personally the world started burning somewhere around December 2016 when Trump came surprising close to starting a military conflict in the South China Sea. Basically, I spent a while thinking, oh dear God, please do not kill my relatives. And then I think I will just end with, when ICFA got cancelled, I had already booked the days off. So there was a part of me that was... I was like, I can spend this time writing my novel. That worked so well [sarcastic tone].

[00:06:41] But oh, and I should plug my latest thing. I have a story in Jonathan Strahan's collection Made to Order. They're all robot stories. It's actually... there are a lot of really awesome people in it, and me. So. Get that.

John Wiswell: [00:06:56] Fantastic. All right, so, yes. So we are here on the "This is fine: Making Art When the World Burns" or, While the World Burns panel. And the first thing that I was hoping to talk to you folks about is how artists often lose sight of how valuable art is to audiences during hard times. It can sap our desire to write or make anything because we feel like what we're doing is worthless. It can also make us not realize how much what we consume is valuable to us. What can art give us during a time when it feels like the world is on fire? Was there ever a time when consuming art helped you process something? And since I'm asking the panel to bare some painful or pertinent part of their psyches, I'm happily throwing myself on the spear first.

[00:07:53] This question is my fault and my fascination. So in terms of when the world was burning, I love your folks' intros about when the world started burning for you. For me it was probably around when I was age 13 and I was the victim of some particularly nightmarish medical malpractice and I was bedridden for more than a year, I was drowning on dry land because of the condition of my lungs. And I really, as a preteen going into being a teen, struggled with the will to fight, the will to go through physical therapy or rehab. And it was fiction that got me through a lot of it. And it was not necessarily fiction, feel good fiction about disabled teens who were rising up and conquering. It was sometimes the darker stories of the Stephen King or the really humorous fiction of like a Douglas Adams. Sometimes it was escapist heroism. I wound up reading The Hobbit probably a dozen times just in that one year in bed. And there was this core value in escape that I feel like is

often sold extremely short. Escapism is not the only thing fantastic literature can give us but it is something that's incredibly valuable for letting people who are trapped in a certain circumstance that they do not have the ability to change, like a teenager who is in a hospital bed, to think about life or think about a different aspect of life for a period of time.

[00:09:29] And that period of time, it seriously is what gave me the mental rest necessary to start trying to do a quarter mile on a treadmill and start trying to wheel myself to the bathroom on my own. And, I mean, that's why I'm a writer today is I'm trying to pay back this wonderful debt I have to this genre that really helped save me.

[00:09:55] So anyway, and that's exactly the sort of reason why I asked to be on the panel and was happy to moderate. So that is certainly one thing that art can give us and one thing that art has given me over the course of my burnings. Chelsea?

C. L. Polk:

[00:10:14] You know, now that you put it that way, I have to say one of the reasons why I'm a writer is because books help me survive. From childhood, yes. And into adulthood. That when all else fails and everything is terrible, I can always just retreat to my bed and read a book. And sometimes that's all I need to do. I was going to say something and I don't remember what it is.

[00:10:56] I kind of agree with John's idea that part of what I'm doing as a writer is I'm repaying a debt that I owe to books for saving me. I'm paying it forward. And part of what I'm doing right now is I realize that the book that I was writing wasn't right for the time. And the reason why was because I realized that I didn't want to write a dystopia. I didn't want to write staring into the chance of, well, certain doom. I wanted to write a story that grasps for a future that I hope to have. And so I am looking at the future and I'm trying to bring it back to us now so that we have something to look forward to.

Fran Wilde:

[00:11:57] So I think, like everybody on the panel, I can talk about childhood experiences that helped me sort of figure out a pattern to get through things. Like John, I have a lot of history with hospitals and braces and things that were meant to straighten or correct or do things that didn't necessarily work as advertised. And getting through that was partially a matter of reading and listening to stories but also learning how to tell myself stories in order to get through some of the longer things.

[00:12:46] And I think that that has good and bad advantages. We're talking a lot about how you come to a situation but I think the opposite is also true. How do you exit the creative process in a way that allows you to reengage with what's going on outside. I learned both from being an A+ medical patient and also being a really, really good kid and an extraordinary student that nobody knew was going through anything. But in the background, my world was on fire from pretty much day one. I got really good at telling stories that made everything look perfect. And that is great if you're writing fiction. It's terrible if you're living it and trying to thumbs-up Amy Poehler your way through everything.

[00:13:46] So I think there's a bit of that that always happens where you want to make a world that you want to run around in, that you want to have adventures in, and you want to share that with other people. But at some point you need to finish it and close it and finding a way to end or close a story or a book or a piece of art is painful, still, because I do want to stay in those stories.

[00:14:13] One of the things that I went, before we started recording, to go get is a book that I keep by my bedside, that's called *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser and if you've hung out with me for long enough, you've heard this before so bear with me. But it is... the introduction to that is one of the most extraordinary things. It's a book of essays about the relevance of poetry and creative arts to live in turmoil and the introduction was written remembering a moment where the poet is on a boat and they are leaving Spain. They're being evacuated from Spain during the civil war and they're talking about war and death and meaning of life. And I love this because I think it may be the first documented episode of Walrusing ever written down because she writes, "As we were talking, we had realizations. We were leaving behind some of all we loved and feared and things that we had feared had begun to be acted out. Our realizations were fresh and young. We had seen the parts of our lives in a new arrangement. There were long pauses between these broken images of life spoken in language after language."

[00:15:28] Here's the walrus part. "Suddenly, throwing his question into talk not at all leading up to it, [Crosstalk: 00:15:36] a man, a printer, several times a refugee asked, 'And poetry, among all this, where is there a place for poetry?'" And she writes, "Then I began to say what I believe." And I love that because she's putting us on the boat leaving this very turbulent time and she's talking about speaking importance and truth to the rest of the world and bringing those stories out. And I keep it by my bed to remind myself that that is important. Saying things, speaking about what you believe and know is really much harder for me than it

seems because I come across as fairly glib, but I've always got this little bug in the back of my head telling me, "No one wants to hear what you think."

[00:16:26] And so part of my process for writing during an apocalypse or when everything is on fire is reminding myself that I do have things to say and that I need to speak as truthfully as I can about them. So that's generally the answer to probably six or seven questions all bundled up.

Maurice Broaddus: [00:16:48] Yeah, as I was thinking about how to answer the question, I mean, I thought about how important watching the TV series *Watchmen* was for me at just that time. Or how reading *Parable of the Sower* or *The Fifth Season*, how much those books had to just help process what it means to survive in oppressive systems. So there is that as part of my answer.

[00:17:13] But the other part of my answer is this, is that creation of art is how I've processed my entire life. I don't really have a sense of giving back as much of a sense of writing for me. And so, in fact I just had an article published last week that basically traces my rage back to 17 year old me and what does that look like to have the same thing, same injustices happen over and over from 17 year old me to 50 year old me, tracing that timeline of rage.

[00:17:48] But then I look back on my career, and I'm like, you know, the first half of my career, I was a horror writer because I was literally just processing my rage and I was very angry. I was angry a lot and thus, I could say things like, hey, I've had nearly 100 short stories published because I have a lot of rage to process. That being said, you know, I'm looking at the stuff I'm writing right now. I still have to write to process the things I'm feeling. I just had a story come out in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. Was a story I hadn't intended to write because I'm on tight deadlines for other things, but my father passed away last November and I had to process that grief somehow. And I had set out to write a little short story, 4,000 words or so just sort of process in the moment through story what I was feeling. I didn't expect it to come out at 20,000 words. Much less trying to explain that to my agent, why I'm writing a novella in the middle of my deadlines, but the fact of the matter is I have to write what is on my heart to process my heart, basically.

[00:18:59] And so, now I find myself writing things, again, to process what's going on with me. To process the, what I see in the world. The injustices we face. But at the same time, I don't want to lose sight of the fact of, I'm not letting these times rob me of my ability to dream and hope, either. So I'm still also writing stories to help me imagine what a

desired future state could look like. So it's that tension, processing my heart of the moment, but processing my dreams.

John Chu:

[00:19:33] Okay, it's interesting because as a kid, I was very much the library as a refuge kid. And at some point, somebody is going to read my work and then hopefully I will have gotten to the point where I'm worthy of a doctoral dissertation. That is the goal. And then somebody will go, why are they always fleeing into libraries, and this will be why.

[00:20:04] So part of, a lot of it is that. Interestingly, for me, I am clearly processing my life through my fiction, but it only really works if I don't realize that I'm doing it. And the example that comes to mind is a story that I wrote that I realized in retrospect was clearly me sort of processing my feelings about my dad's then impending death. And at the way things timed out, I basically got the copyedits back at the same time as my dad's funeral. So it actually wasn't until I was reading through the copyedits and was like, oh my God. This is what I did.

[00:20:54] Which, I'm sure this says something about my process, I'm not sure what. But I don't seem to be able to do it intentionally. But in terms of like, when consuming art helped me process something...

[00:21:11] Actually two examples come to mind. One is very straightforward which is that basically in college there was a time, I mean, like I had the flu or something so I sat down and I read like, Mercedes Lackey's Last Herald-Mage and then that sort of gave me the strength and the confidence to start coming out to people. Which was sort of very straightforward. And I'm sure Mercedes Lackey has heard, I'm sure people go up to her and tell her this all the time.

[00:21:44] But the other thing is, weirdly enough, on 9/11 what I really wanted to listen to and what I kept listening to over and over again was Stephen Sondheim's and John Weidman's Assassins. So in the midst of this great national tragedy, what I really wanted to hear was a musical about the various people who have attempted to kill the president of the United States. And I think back on it and I think for me it was sort of knowing that even in a time where we're all very encouraged to rally around the flag, that we can still say dissonant things and that truths can be dissonant and they are still worth saying.

[00:22:31] But yeah, I'll be honest, the way I deal with stress, and it's been this way since college. I get stressed out in college and I would start doing push ups on my dorm room floor. So that's actually how I deal with all of this is I do a lot of exercise.

John Wiswell: [00:22:57] All right, so what Maurice and John were talking about sort of brings me directly to the second question that we had talked a little bit about before the panel. And that's, this panel is in part to help some folks who are struggling to create art and I'm curious about how our writing processes have been going this year and during the events of this year. This panel was brainstormed, I believe, in the middle of the COVID outbreak. I mean, we're, as of this recording, still in the middle of the COVID outbreak. But with that lens of things burning, but it's hardly the only fire that has existed this year. And so I'm curious, how has your writing process been going this year? And has it changed? And have you managed to adapt against or along with those changes as you've been working. And let's start with Fran.

Fran Wilde: [00:23:55] I think definitely it's changed but in part it's changed because I'm realizing that in order to work well and also to be a good citizen and participate in my community and be there for my students, I need to take breaks. I can't just run myself into the ground and, Chelsea, I hear you laughing. It's true. I have learned this, I just haven't applied it yet. But I know it in my soul that burnout is real and it's not just creative burnout. It's also timeline burnout and social media burnout and it's not the, Oh, I need to go do some selfcare. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the kind of stepping away to clear your mind so that you can reengage proactively with situations and try and help make a change instead of feeling like nothing you're doing is working.

[00:25:01] That's the game now, is being able to stick with stuff. And so in the case of, I was about to come up on a deadline and I was pushing myself to make it because I push myself really hard to make every deadline and I just looked at what was happening and what my brain was doing, and realized I needed some extra time. And so I sort of girded myself for asking for extra time and instead of sort of the pushback I was giving myself, I got a lot of support from people, to say, okay, take the time that you need to do this well.

[00:25:44] And it turned out I just needed to let the pressure off a little bit and I got everything turned in about two weeks later. But that was just what I needed... I needed to just say, okay, I need to step back for a second and deal with that. And it's the same thing with community things. When you've got mutual help groups and sometimes things get loud in there. It's useful to step back instead of trying to fix everything immediately, and I think it's the same sort of thing.

John Wiswell: [00:26:21] Maurice?

Maurice Broaddus: [00:26:21] Yeah, so, in some ways things have changed but in most ways they really haven't for me. It's just a matter of adjusting where I do my routine. So I still have a fairly structured writing routine, it's just now I'm in the same house with both of my boys, 18 and 19 year old boys. My 75 year old mother as well as my wife of 20 years and so it's a matter of how do we all stay under the same roof and not drive each other insane. And so. I have an office space that I go to. We just carve out these imaginary spaces. I still write at a coffee shop. It's just my coffee shop is now the porch. Or my half of the porch is the coffee shop. My mother's half of the porch is the veranda. So we all make up these names for where we are in the house.

[00:27:29] But, like I say, I keep up my usual routine. So my usual, as far as I'm concerned, the world's always been on fire. So I've literally been in survival mode as routine. So part of that is I always limit how much news intake I have. I always limit how much social media intake I have. I'm always... I still, I'm very intentional about engaging friends and family a lot to maintain that sense of community so I don't lose touch.

[00:28:00] And then, frankly, writing is like the only thing I can control in my world. Just putting words on a page, so, luckily my agent and publisher aren't going to hear any of this. But in this time, in the last couple months, I think... let's see. Yeah, about two and a half months, I finished two novels, finished two plays, wrote six short stories, wrote a dozen essays. Plotted out two novels no one has asked for, and I'm just sitting here going man, I wish I had something to do, is pretty much usual.

John Wiswell: [00:28:35] Wow.

Maurice Broaddus: [00:28:34] That's where I'm at. I don't want to be that dude on the panels saying, hey this is a great time. This is not a great time. This is literally me processing anxiety by putting words on a page.

Fran Wilde: [00:28:50] I get that. I'm a little jealous but I get that.

John Chu: [00:28:53] Okay, I am sort of in this very weird position in that the industry that I work in is effectively infrastructure so Massachusetts deems it essential, which on the plus side means I still have a job. So I'm not actually complaining. But it ends up being a job that right now, I'm working work that I get to do completely from home, which is good because oh, I really don't want to go to an office for oh so many reasons right now. But so the thing that I run into is that I end up in this situation where the place that I do my day job ends up being the same place that I write. And this would all work much better if they were separate places

so that I can say, oh, I am now going to this other place to do my other job.

[00:30:00] Which doesn't happen because I live in a postage stamp. So for me, it's sort of developing the discipline to go, well, I am doing this job now. And then some period of time later, no, now I am doing this job. And all of that was much easier when job A was literally dozens of miles away from job B. But now they are literally on top of each other and so it ends up being sort of this discipline issue for me. And so, so yeah. So for me that's very much a work in progress.

[00:30:45] So sadly, I have not written two novels. I wish.

John Wiswell:

[00:30:51] Yeah, so I came into the COVID outbreak thinking that I was Maurice. I was just like, I'm writing a novel, I crushed it. I was doing thousands and thousands of words a day. I was doing revisions. I was doing short stories and essays on the side. And I was just like, oh, I guess since my life's always on fire, I guess I'm just mentally ready for this. People were learning to social distance and they were having the anxieties about not getting to see people as much as they wanted to. Well because of my terrible immune system, I've lived kind of like that for a lot of my life. So I just thought that I was immune. And then I finished the book and I turned it over to beta readers and fell right on my face and I could not. I could not get up and just do the next thing as soon as the major thing was done.

[00:31:38] And there were the major distractions of, I'm a counselor for people whose disabilities have left them extremely vulnerable and I've had fires that I don't feel like I should talk about publicly to put out. But other people had emergencies that needed my help and then I had what happens to me even in times of non national crisis, which is that I had a terrible health episode that reset my entire ability to work. I didn't really know what to do and started beating myself up in exactly the way that I was telling people to not do.

[00:32:22] I think this kind of artistic hypocrisy is fairly common. It's just like, please, be better to yourself than I am when I am out of eyeshot. And what I wound up doing to try to start to move out of that was writing small doses that were small enough at a time that whatever came to interrupt wouldn't ruin my flow. Because my brother and his girlfriend had to move in here because they didn't have another place to shelter and I'm definitely not letting anything happen to them. They're incredibly important to my life. Somebody.. I needed to help somebody find a safe place to shelter that they couldn't live with me but they desperately needed to get away from the living situation that they were

in in these dire times. And those intrusions were frequent enough that what I did was I started to break the work down into smaller chunks and force myself to acknowledge, you did get some of the work done.

[00:33:22] And so, sometimes that means that I knock out a short story in an evening, and sometimes it means that I don't get as much done as I'd like. But I have to be realistic about my health and I have to be realistic about the people in my life who are incredibly important who need a hand as well.

[00:33:41] Speaking of hands, Fran, you have your hand up?

Fran Wilde:

[00:33:41] I do. And now I will put it down by clicking this button. I just wanted to sort of riff on something that Maurice was saying and something that other people have said, and John, you spoke to it, too. Just that in this current iteration of things, our work spaces and our family spaces have gotten compounded on top of each other. It's very hard to parent and maintain the iron-eyed focus it takes for me to finish a draft. At the start of drafting, I do a 1,000 words, 2,000 words and then I get up and I make lunch and then I do some laundry and I do some other things. But when I'm in the midst of the big parts of a draft, I can get lost in it for days.

[00:34:35] And this happened when I was a computer programmer, too. I was just sort of soaked up in the aspect of creating something and somebody could come in and put a sandwich down in front of me and I wouldn't notice it until I finished the job. That doesn't work when you have family at home. It doesn't work when somebody needs something immediately. And luckily, I'm parenting a teenager who doesn't want to have anything to do with me most of the time. But when she does need me, I need to be right there. And breaking that connection with the story that I'm telling for my novel or my short story in order to get her what she needs is often a pretty traumatic feeling. And that gets softened by school, bless it. And she's not at school now, so there's a lot more differentials and there's a lot more things that I need to notice that I haven't had to do on as quick a turn around.

[00:35:47] So factors in dramatically, too. To all the parents out there who are writing and creating anything right now, especially parents who are also having to help with homeschooling and figure out what the summer looks like and keep everybody afloat on this massive generation ship that we're on right now. I really salute you. You're doing important work. It may not feel like it's mattering, but it does matter.

John Wiswell:

[00:36:19] Chelsea?

C. L. Polk: [00:36:21] When Emerald City Comic Con decided that they were going to cancel, COVID-19, I breathed a sigh of relief and said, okay. I work at home. I live alone. I generally don't leave my apartment. This is fine. And I hadn't really been writing at the time, and that's partially the circumstances of my publishing schedule and partly because I'd just finished a trilogy. I'd just finished the Kingston Cycle. And I had spent years in a world I had created and I needed a lot of time to let it go so that I could clear out the space. My mind is a house, all my characters live there. And they bother me, and I had to kick them all out, and then I had to clean up the house, and then I had to figure out who I was going to invite in. But since I was waiting on publishing, I was at loose ends for a while, I didn't know what I was going to write next. And I thought, oh, I'll write short stories. And I managed to write a novelette about an isolated space pirate and a pop star going to Neptune's orbit to watch aliens that are basically a group mind organism that sings in space.

[00:37:45] I don't know. That's what I wrote.

John Wiswell: [00:37:45] That rules.

C. L. Polk: [00:37:47] And I like it. But I didn't really feel like I was productive. Like I wasn't head-first in a novel and I started to feel impatient. But I didn't feel like I should start anything. So naturally I decided that I wanted to focus on writing craft, as that is my lifelong pursuit, right? And I decided that I wanted to get more in depth in the emotional life of the characters that I write and as a result, I kind of felt my emotional life kind of unrepressing. Normally I kind of keep my feelings locked down pretty hard but I was leaking all over the place. I would be out of sorts. I needed a good cry. I would watch The Voice auditions with four chair turns and weep. And just kind of get that catharsis going.

[00:38:41] But I was also writing about my inner life and my feelings way more often than I usually did while I was waiting to start creating art. But being in this position where I was more open and more vulnerable revealed to me how much time I spend dissociating and disengaged from my feelings.

[00:39:02] Like, I didn't know. I'm sure some of you noticed, but I did not know. And then things just kept on snowballing. It was like every week was another year of what the heckity. And I kind of felt like I shut down. But I have kind of gotten it back a little bit lately. And the only thing that really works is when I look at my stories through the emotional lens of the character. I don't know what that's about but that's what makes the ideas go. So I'm kind of going with it where I'm like, not necessarily about, oh, and it's the big fight scene and it's really exciting. It's the big

fight scene and how does my character feel about this. What is the impact on them inside themselves. And this is a way that I haven't really thought in depth before. So there is that, this whole inward journey that I have taken. I am kind of emerging. I have brought a prize back with me and I'm kind of happy about that. And that's how I've adapted is I'm looking at this emotional lens and I'm trying to be as clear and as honest with it as I possibly can. And that's how I'm getting through a day of writing.

John Wiswell: [00:40:36] All right. Wow. Thank you everybody. Those were amazing. I think some of those helped me. I appreciate you sharing. And Chelsea kind of helped us segue into probably the next topic, which might be the last topic we have time to unpack at length, which is, have you noticed, in the last year, a change in the kind of work that you want to produce or have you felt a desire to add to the kinds of things you already do. Maybe you're not going to discontinue epic fantasy but you want to go into body horror. Or into slapstick comedy, or something else. And if you have pursued that, has producing that work helped you cope with any of the stresses that we've been living through?

[00:41:26] And we will start with Maurice.

Maurice Broaddus: [00:41:27] We can probably guess what my answer's going to be. So in a lot of ways, have I noticed any changes in the kind of work I want to produce, no not really because I'm producing the stuff that I've always wanted to produce. So for example, in 2016, I was like hey, you know what I need? I need to dream of a better future, flat out. And so that's what my current science fiction trilogy is about. It's just me dreaming of a better future. That being said, while I'm working on that trilogy, yeah, I'm right now in the middle of doing a segue into writing a Lovecraftian short story that interrogates Lovecraft through the lens of hip-hop artists. You know, a story no one's asked for, but it's a story that... I just want to. You know, let me deconstruct racism a little bit to kind of illustrate why we find ourselves in this situation we find ourselves in.

Fran Wilde: [00:42:32] Can we ask for that now?

John Wiswell: [00:42:33] Yeah, I'd like to ask for it.

Maurice Broaddus: [00:42:36] Okay. Oh good, so I'll keep working on that. So, you know, but and I'll balance that with, because like I said, I still do a lot of community work, but my community work ties in with my current work. So my community work is my science fiction work. It's like, hey, what if we won? What's the world we'd like to see if we won. So it's like working alongside my community, dreaming this world we want to see into

existence. So it's not so much that I see changes in the work, it's just this is how I cope, you know.

[00:43:16] And so I'm still dreaming but when stuff piles up to where it's interfering with my dreaming, because you know, a couple weeks ago it's me and my family all out in the streets in the protest, and then I have to take a pause from dreaming to process what life is like in this moment. Thus I wrote that article. Thus I'm writing this other short story, because I still have to cope, but I still want to dream. So it's not really a change, it's just how I always do things. It's just, I really have a... this question has really drawn attention to the fact that man, I've always kind of done this. So, that's where I'm at.

John Chu:

[00:43:57] Yeah, like Maurice, I don't think it's changed the sorts of things I write at all, because at the end of the day, I'm writing for me. I'm writing the sorts of things that I want to read. And as you can tell by my massive audience... but setting that aside, but I will say that I think I've gotten, I think I've become much more pointed. That we've sort of turned the burner up, and we've sort of gotten to this point where I've become less subtle and it's become much more important that whatever it is that I'm trying to say that I say it as well as I can.

[00:44:43] And then, so, I may set out writing a story about a daughter and her father and how now that she's matured, they need to forge a relationship with each other as adults. But by the time I'm done with it, they do this through the necessity of punching out fascists. Like, it suddenly becomes very important that we punch fascists as often as possible and that's how they reach their understanding with each other.

[00:45:11] So I find myself doing more of that. But on the other hand, that's kind of what I was doing before. Only now the fascists, only now you get to see the fascists get punched.

John Wiswell:

[00:45:27] So in my case, I've noticed small changes. The bigger scale changes really happened in the last few years for me as I got accepted into queer communities, as I met more people who are like me, who are asexual, who are aromantic. But then also met this wonderful queer contingency of trans people and gay people and bi people and lesbians and intersex people who have all just sort of come together for mutual support and are creating their own subcultures together rather than isolating into smaller camps. And by the time quarantine happened in 2020, I was just so keenly desirous to read more stories about people who create spaces for each other. And sometimes about how they can be kept poorly or moderated poorly, but sometimes also just about the overwhelming relief of coming into a place where you are actually safe.

[00:46:30] And so I've found that a lot of the stories that I've written, especially in the last two months as I've really started picking up have been either about those, the problems of those or the absolute ecstasy of those.

[00:46:50] Yeah, what about you, Chelsea?

C. L. Polk:

[00:46:51] Well, it's like Maurice. I'm looking toward the future. I'm reaching for a world that I can hope for. So I'm trying to think of a world where I belong. But I'm still writing fantasy novels. I'm still trying to write stories for people that show them something. But instead of dudes, capitalism is bad and we should probably do something about this, I want to bring back the future that I want to see. I've been spending time kind of wallowing around in what does the brightest timeline look like and what does it feel like? What does it do?

[00:47:42] And I want to bring what I find there back to now and say, like, what about this, guys? Why don't we try this? As far as form goes, I'm kind of flirting with the idea of more interactive stories, but I don't know what I'm going to do with that urge. I don't think I want to write 100,000 interactive game. I think I just want to write these tiny little things. Like 10 minutes max, you walk away changed, is kind of the mission statement I have for this thing that's been percolating in the back of my brain. Just for the fun of it.

[00:48:22] Or another thing that I thought of today, is kind of gamifying thinking about writing craft. And yeah. That's kind of where my head is at right now.

Fran Wilde:

[00:48:39] So, 2016 was when I sort of realized that what I was working on was not what I should be working on. I woke up one morning and realized this is a story that I needed to tell and it was going to be very hard and I didn't even realize how hard it was going to be. But that was Riverland. And so my writing style changed back in 2016 as everything else was changing. I'm definitely writing more portal fantasies where you have to go somewhere else to figure out how to solve the problems in your real world. I'm doing that a lot with a lot of different types of things. Even adult fiction, there's definitely some sort of transition between realities going on and I think that figuring out problems, problem-solving stories is definitely where that's landing.

[00:49:48] But that's what monsters and magic do a lot of the time. I was looking up what I was doing while I was writing Riverland and one of the things that happened is the author Kate Milford, wonderful children's author, wrote just... she and I wrote this article called Monsters and

Magic for The Washington Post in August of 2016 and it starts off with, "In fiction, dystopias come and go, but monsters and magic are forever." And we're talking about how monsters and defeating monsters is an act of problem-solving that kids and adults can go through in fiction in order to figure out how to solve problems in real life. Because books are kind of portals in a similar way to portal fantasies being where characters work out stuff. We go into books to figure out how to work out stuff in our own lives.

[00:50:52] So I finally sort of sat down and said, I'm going to write this thing that I swore I would never write, and that's what changed, is me deciding that all of the things that I didn't think I could say about stuff that happened a way long time ago, I realized I could say. And I had to figure out how. So that hopefully will be ongoing but hopefully less wrenching of a process in the future, but I think that that's what drove it home. It's not just telling stories anymore.

John Wiswell: [00:51:34] All right, and that brings us close to the end of our time. I just want to ask Casey if she has any questions from the audience that we can hit quickly before it...

Casey Blair: [00:51:45] I do, I'm going to toss you one from Marissa Lingen. And she asks, if you find some kinds of works easier to focus on than others, like drafting or developmental editing or line editing. Is any of it easier or harder for you and does that track with how easy and hard it is during less stressful times? And I'm actually going to add in the other side of this which I think John Wiswell may have talked about earlier. Are there also any ways of replenishing your creative well that are easier or harder for you during stressful times?

John Wiswell: [00:52:28] Okay. John, would you like to start?

John Chu: [00:52:33] Okay. That's actually a hard thing for me to answer because what I've been doing for the past mumble amount of time is writing this novel. So I actually haven't had a variety of things to do except to try to write this novel, which is happening very slowly, but that seems to be invariant with the amount of stress that I'm feeling, so it's not like, whoo-hoo pandemic is not affecting me at all! That's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying that apparently the amount of additional stress that I'm feeling. And it may just be that I've been writing so slowly that the amount of extra stress isn't making it go any slower, which is possible.

[00:53:29] But like I said, the way that I recharge and the way that I... is actually that I go exercise. Which is a little tricky since I'm not going to the gym, but like I said. But I like I said, even in college, I was just doing

push ups until there was no tomorrow. But that seems to be the way I process things. Like even under happier times when I was going to the gym, if you look at my weight log, my weight log actually has story ideas and oh! This is how I solve this story problem.

Maurice Broaddus: [00:54:02] That's awesome.

John Chu: [00:54:04] So that's apparently how I process things.

John Wiswell: [00:54:07] On my part... my general rule is that the hardest part of writing is whatever part I have to do write now. Every other part looks super easy from here. And I don't feel like that particular element has changed that much in these times. It's mostly been about getting to the space where I can work at all and a lot of the replenishing of the well of getting the will or the verve to go work again, or work more, is convincing myself that I deserve to spend the time consuming art. That I need to go read. I need to nourish the narrative brain rather than just treating it as work where I punch in and punch out a certain time and then go and do something else.

[00:54:59] Some of that was getting healthy enough to exercise again, because that's most of the... that's almost the only time that I watch television or film. So that's how I take in the ready-made narrative of visual art. And some of it was getting enough space and enough quiet in my little nook that I could read. Just enough to get my imagination sparked. After that, I find it pretty easy to indulge in having really weird ideas, from which I will certainly run away and write a story.

[00:55:30] What about you, Chelsea?

C. L. Polk: [00:55:31] Well, I mean, like you, whatever I'm working on is the hardest part, so if I'm drafting then it's impossible and I wish I were editing. And then when I'm editing, I wish I were drafting. Just, yeah. I'm contrary like that. And I have been feeling a bit like I've abandoned my discipline. I'm not one of those, you must write every day or else you are not valid kind of writers, but I feel like I need to engage with what I'm personally writing. Or I have to engage in kind of trying to deepen my writing craft on a daily basis. It could be that I don't really feel like drafting today. Or I don't really have what I think I need in order to draft. So I will do something else related to that work and it counts.

[00:56:28] And I've been finding that planning and doing the background work on a novel that I want to write has been the most helpful for me. And the most helpful thing that I'm doing in the planning and background work on the novel, everyone laugh at me, it's my book's

Pinterest board. It is a precious, precious jewel. It doesn't feel like time wasting at all. I feel like I'm taking these pictures and I'm kind of syncretizing this world that I want to write in and that I want to generate ideas for and that I want to portray as vividly as possible. And playing with my Pinterest board has been kind of the route to doing that.

[00:57:23] And then, when it comes to replenishing my creative well, I kind of haven't been replenishing my creative well. What's been going on is feeling like I need... I need to take a break. And so, I need to take a break. I'm going to read a book. I need to take a break. I'm going to watch *The Untamed*. I need to take a break. I'm going to play *World of Warcraft*. And it doesn't feel like goofing off to me, it feels like, this is what I need to do. I still need this sense of distance. I'm not ready to dive in yet. And so I'm working around the edges of the story but I'm not actually wading into it and that's fine for right now. It might not be fine in three weeks, but it's fine for right now.

Fran Wilde:

[00:58:19] So for the most part, I do have a routine. I tend to write in the morning. It's better if I do that before I open Twitter. But that would require never sleeping. So it tends to slide. And I notice that my writing is getting harder as I let go of my routine. So part of what I've been trying to do is when I'm writing or editing, I try to do it about the same time every day. I do a lot more version drafting now when I'm just letting myself drop whatever wants to be in the story in the story and then I'll go back and revise it. And that's new.

[00:59:09] I'm finding that each story that I'm writing needs to be written differently which is also new. But editing, I have always loved because editing means I can print stuff out and color on it with different color inks and draw stuff around it. One part of my editing process has always been that I retype everything and when I am doing that it means that if I don't have the energy to type something into the book it doesn't go into the book because my body has decided that that section is not worth it anymore. It's been a lot harder to find the time for long stretches to do that. But I love it... it's such a good feeling when I finish something, still, and I want to hold onto that.

[00:59:58] As far as refilling the well, it for me has always been walking around and looking at things and listening to the sounds of a park or the conversations nearby or talking with people that I don't often get to talk to. Museums are huge for me as far as just sitting and drawing in a museum and noticing things. And that is all kind of cut off. And so I've been trying now and then to do drop-in lectures. Various museums and non-profits have lectures available. And I've been throwing my

membership dollars around to lots of places just to try and support them. And then going to their lectures and attending. I went to one on The Little Prince that the Morgan Library was holding and that, I couldn't focus on everything for the whole time but I picked up a couple of things that just made me think in new directions. And so I'm going to try and continue to do that but also getting outside and drawing has become much more a way to sort of refill because when I sit and draw, I notice things that I wouldn't otherwise see if I was just cruising through somewhere and taking a picture.

[01:01:13] So that's still trying to do it. It's definitely a lot harder now. And occasionally sitting and watching a movie, but they usually tend to be comfort movies. I haven't found that I'm really ready to take a risk on anything new lately movie-wise because it's such a big commitment. So I've been watching old stuff.

Maurice Broaddus: [01:01:44] Let's see. For me, drafting has always been the hardest part for me. The whole laying down of new words and so, during these times it's been harder anyway. So the hard thing has been harder and the easier things have been easier is kind of the short version. Because I love editing, the whole revision process. I love that part. But then that part goes by pretty quickly for me because of that. It has forced a slight change in my process which is to kind of relax a little more when it comes to drafting and just go, you know what? I just have to get something down on the page so that I can get to the next stage I actually love. Let me just lay down the tracks as fast as I can, that way I can come back and just take my time and revise it to something good.

[01:02:35] The other change to my routine has been this whole idea of just... I think everything in my life just seems to do double duty, now that I think about it. So my routine is now, in the mornings I get up and I end up in a Zoom conversation. Well, not a Zoom conversation, but I Zoom time with a couple friends who are also in the process of writing, so we'll just sit there and even though we're not talking, we're not talking together. And we're writing together. That way we're still being intentional about being in touch with each other but still sort of holding each other accountable to get words on the page.

[01:03:13] And then same thing with the whole idea of replenishing because when I'll take breaks it's to go mindlessly play Clash of Clans, for example. Which is a game, I now, which my boys have recently rediscovered, so it's like the three of us get together, we formed our own thing and so we get to strategize. It's like me and them and their friends all in the same group. But we get to do that together.

[01:03:41] And then I can go take a break and watch television with my wife, because that's what she likes to do to mindlessly get away from things. So it's like, well, I do too! And so we will do that together that way I'll spend time with her and I'll get to get in some TV time.

[01:03:56] Then I also have to, I exercise before I write and so I'll be playing Pokemon and listening to audio books as I walk the neighborhood. And then frankly the biggest thing that replenishes me is my activism and my community work. And so even though a lot of that has shifted to virtual work unless we have to go down to protest or something. I'm still doing that. I'm still engaged with community and trying to do as much virtually and staying in touch with people because in the end, it's that voice of community informing my work. It's just a critical part to my process. So everything just sort of feeds into each other.

John Wiswell: [01:04:45] Well, that was fantastic. Thank you all so much for sharing so much on this panel. This is as 4th Street a podcast as has ever existed.

[01:04:56] Just before we sign out entirely, where can folks find you or your work? And let's start with John.

John Chu: [01:05:08] Okay, this should be quick. Let's see, I have a bibliography at johnchu.net. J-O-H-N-C-H-U.net. Somebody is cybersquatting on .com, I will never get over this. So there's a bibliography there. Likewise, you can find me on Twitter at @john_chu. Again, the person who has John Chu without the underscore has tweeted like a total of three times in the past two decades. I will never get over that, either. But that's where you can reach me and then get at my work.

John Wiswell: [01:05:49] Chelsea?

C. L. Polk: [01:05:52] You can find my website at CLPolk.com. It's pretty bare bones. It's what I've written. Please subscribe to my newsletter, all that good stuff. If you want to find me, you will find me on Twitter at @CLPolk. And I'm there pretty much every day, doing whatever. You know.

John Wiswell: [01:06:20] Oh, I guess. You can find me, John Wiswell at, literally just at @Wiswell, W-I-S-W-E-L-L on Twitter. I have JohnWiswell.blogspot.com because I... but I am in the process of negotiating with the person who has JohnWiswell.com so perhaps by the time this podcast goes up, there will be a pleasant surprise if you type it in.

John Chu: [01:06:41] Good luck.

John Wiswell: [01:06:43] How about you, Fran?

Fran Wilde: [01:06:44] You can find me at FranWilde, W-I-L-D-E .net. And I also have a Patreon which is very similar. I think there might be an underscore in it, hold on let me check. Nope, it's Patreon.com/FranWilde. Most of the time new things and sneak peeks go up on Patreon first. I tend to put funny pictures up of my dog on Instagram.com at @Fran_Wilde and I'm also at Twitter at @Fran_Wilde but today I seem to be getting a lot of static over a tweet that I made last night. So I'm not there right now and I will be doing a Philadelphia Free Library event Friday, June 26th with Siobhan Carroll. We'll be reading live. Y'all should drop in and say hi.

[01:07:39] I also do a 15 minute question and answer session with JS Mayank who teaches screenwriting at Western. He and I talk about one question every Friday night, it's called Hey, I was Wondering. We tend to be very funny.

Maurice Broaddus: [01:07:57] Let's see. Everything about me is at Maurice Broaddus. So it's like my Twitter, my Facebook, my Patreon, is all Maurice Broaddus. And then MauriceBroaddus.com is where you can find a lot of my stuff. Like some of my latest two books was Pimp My Airship and The Usual Suspects. I have a story up on Beneath Ceaseless Skies, Bound by Sorrow and then my most recent essay up on the Indianapolis Monthly site if you want to see my Black rage, I guess. So there's that.

John Wiswell: [01:08:37] All right, thank you all so...

Casey Blair: [01:08:38] All right, and I think that's it. Thank you panelists for joining us and thank you to everyone who tuned in to listen to our podcast edition of 4th Street Fantasy 2020. Take care and we hope to see you folks at the con next year.

John Wiswell: [01:08:55] Excellent.

Scott Lynch: [01:08:55] Okay everyone. Hey, can you hear me?

Fran Wilde: [01:08:57] Yeah.

John Chu: [01:08:57] Yes.

Scott Lynch: [01:09:01] Well, I'm ready to start recording whenever you guys want to start the podcast.

[01:09:03] (laughter)

Fran Wilde: [01:09:03] Very funny.