

**Rogue Librarians, Bonus Episode**  
**Author Nadine Pinede**

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Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books.

We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, and Alanna.

And we are the Rogue Librarians.

We would love for you to participate in our discussion.

Please visit [theroguelibrarians.com](http://theroguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook at Rogue Librarians Pod.

Today, we are very excited to share our interview with Nadine Pinede.

Nadine is a poet, author, editor, translator, and education consultant.

The daughter of Haitian immigrants, Nadine is the first Rhodes Scholar of Haitian descent and earned her doctorate in philosophy of education.

Author of award-winning informational books, her fiction appears in Haiti Noir, and her Pushcart Prize nominated poetry has been widely anthologized.

Nadine's debut young adult novel-in-verse, *When the Mapou Sings*, will be published by Candlewick Press on December 3rd, 2024.

*When the Mapou Sings* has already been named a Junior Library Guild Selection and a Most Anticipated Book of the Fall by Kirkus Reviews.

In their review of the novel, Kirkus Reviews wrote, Pinede's beautifully written debut sharply observes class divisions and encourages readers to ask critical questions about dignity.

The well-drawn characters, strong dialogue and surprising twists add depth.

A rich lyrical story that shows the high cost young women pay for daring to dream of a better life.

It was so wonderful to talk with Nadine about her novel today.

This interview was extra special for me because Nadine is also my friend.

I met her at the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Conference in New York in February, and she was the BIPOC Scholarship winner for that conference.

She's just such a lovely, warm, thoughtful person and I absolutely loved reading her book.

It was so much fun to get to understand what was going on behind the scenes and how this book came to be, and about her research and why she made the choices she did, and also to learn so much more about Haiti's history, which as we talk about in the interview has been coming up a lot more in recent discussions in the political climate in America right now.

So what did the two of you think about the interview?

I, as always, as it always seems to happen, I should say, felt like I had just made a new friend as well.

And there was so much more that I wanted to discuss with Nadine.

She's just so smart and her writing is just so beautiful.

I thought it was really interesting when she mentioned her review process of her book and how Ashley Haute-Perreuse, who is also an author that we have interviewed on the post, had been one of her readers.

And it just feels like we've created a big family here.

And that was really special.

I just loved all of the things that she referenced.

So many, it's going to make getting them all into our show notes a challenge.

But I've been jotting down this whole long list of things to read and look at.

And she's just so well versed in her subject matter.

I'm just fascinated.

Well, without further ado, here is our interview with Nadine Pinede.

Nadine, thank you so much for joining us on Rogue Librarians today.

Well, thank you for inviting me.

We are so excited to talk to you today, and congratulations on the upcoming release of your debut young adult novel and verse, *When the Mapou Sings*.

Thank you.

It's an exciting time.

I'm sure, and probably a very busy time too.

Very hectic.

But you know, it's something interesting that they don't tell you, is that the period between the publication and when it actually, you know, when you finish a novel and when you see it published, it can stretch out for a while.

So it's been at least a year and a half, two years, you know, to see it now coming out into the world.

It's a very special feeling.

We wanted to start with a couple of questions about your background before we get to the book.

What was one of the most influential books that you read when you were growing up and why?

That is, you know, I was looking and thinking, and I think that that's a difficult question because what I loved reading when I was younger, it's such a mix.

It's a strange mix.

So I'll just give you one.

And that book would be The Diary of Anne Frank.

And it's because I loved history when I was young.

And that's partly because my mother told me and taught me a lot of history, especially Haitian history, but, you know, European, American, any history.

And I also loved the journal form.

And her voice, there was just something that made me think that she was a friend.

So every time I opened the pages and read the book, I felt less alone.

And that's a book that I read and re-read a lot when I was younger.

That's a wonderful choice.

And yes, it is.

I remember I read it in class in seventh grade, and it was definitely the most impactful book that I read that year.

Yes.

And having gone to Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and having visited, that was also a very moving experience to really see the window.

She was looking out of as she was writing, go up the stairs, and know that's also where they were taken, where the whole, everyone hiding was taken.

So yeah, I would say the Diary of Anne Frank.

Well, so how did you decide to become a writer?

I don't know that it was a decision per se.

I think it was more compulsion maybe that I just wrote.

You know, I remember being young.

I think it came through reading.

So I remember being three or four and having a book in French.

So my first language that I read in and spoke in was French.

And I heard Haitian Creole around me.

But we were in Canada.

And I read this book called *Je veux lire*, which is I want to read.

But I mean, I read it maybe, you know, every day, three times a day.

You know, so just the desire to read led to the desire to write because I thought, well, if they can do this on a page, maybe there's something I could put on a page as well.

So it came early.

And I think when I was younger, I wanted to be a visual artist.

I did a lot of drawing, sketching.

I actually did a magazine cover for a publication called *Read Magazine*.

I don't think it still exists.

But I was so proud of that.

And my parents said, well, you know, you can't make a living as an artist.

So I dashed my hopes.

But yeah, so my first love, I would say, it was the visual arts and then writing.

But both were part of my life very early on and also part of my family there.

We had visual artists in the family.

An editor, newspaper editor, my grandfather.

My great uncle was a graphic artist, married to the painter Lois Mallu-Jones, who is very well known.

Her work is in the National Museum in Washington, DC.

So composer, my uncle was a composer.

So yeah, we had a lot of people who were in the creative fields in the family.

And that gave me the sense that it was possible to do.

But so I guess my parents really shouldn't have said what they said.

But I think they were thinking in the United States, it wouldn't be possible to make a living as an artist.

Well, I think we're ready to dive into your beautiful book.

So if you would, please give our listeners an introduction to *When the Mapou Sings*.

Can I just read from it?

That works for us.

My birth brought your death.

Your blood, a lavalasse in rainy season.

Papa buried the placenta with orange seeds and watered them with tears.

Papa told me you were a mother tree, and your great-grandmother was a princess from the first people who named us Haiti, the land of mountains.

She fell in love with Amaron, a runaway who hid in caves and climbed mountains to freedom, then returned with his princess to fight the French.

Papa does his best to hide the ashes in his heart.

He makes tables, chairs, cedar coffins to sell in his shop.

Your older sister, Tante Lila, never married.

She moved in with us.

When she braids my hair, it's always too tight.

The dresses she sews hang loose on my body, as thin as a gazelle.

Whatever she cooks always needs salt, not like cousin Phoebus whose food makes our tongues dance.

Tante Lila prays the rosary every day, scolds me when I climb my favorite Mapou, the sacred tree.

So I keep our secret.

How in the forest, when I touch the trees, barks grainy, knotted or peeled, slick, smooth.

I see shapes in the wood, calling me to carve them.

I feel the heartbeat of their roots pulse through my feet.

The trees sing to me.

Inside each one of them, a tiny spark of you.

Thank you.

That was beautiful.

That was lovely.

Well, thank you.

You mentioned your love of poetry a little bit earlier, Nadine.

Could you tell us more why you decided to write *When the Mapou Sings* as a novel in verse?

And what did you find were some of the advantages and challenges to writing the novel this way?

It must be because I'm a masochist, because it was extremely difficult.

It started as, you know, an ordinary, I shouldn't say an ordinary, but a novel in prose.

And that was my MFA thesis, so my Master of Fine Arts thesis for a program that is now unfortunately shuttered.

It was called the Northwest Institute for Literary Arts.

It was on Whidbey Island, which is north of Seattle.

And it was a low residency program, which meant, you know, you could go about your life and work.

And then twice a year, we gathered there and did intensive workshops.

So it came out of that.

And actually, it came from a nonfiction article I wrote about a trip to Haiti that morphed into this fiction.

Edwidge Danticat was my thesis advisor.

So she was a wonderful editor and helped me get through sort of the the wordiness of the novel.

And I thought it was all right.

And then she chose a chapter for her collection called Haiti Noir.

So the Noir collection is published by Akashic in in New York.

And there's Brooklyn Noir, you know, Newark Noir.

And this was all about Haiti.

So it was a chapter from the novel.

And it's a chapter that is no longer in it.

So it's an interesting thing.

It's something that I cut.

It was a contemporary storyline that explained some of what was going on in the past.

And I felt that I didn't need to have that.

So the novel stayed sort of in the prose form for several years as we moved from the US to Belgium for my husband's work.

And also dealt with the health challenges my father faced and he passed away in 2015.

And then I really would work on it in sort of like binge moments.

You know, I would go to a residency and I would work and work and work and then I'd come back and not touch it.

And that was not the best way to do it, because I would lose touch with the characters and the story.

And each time I returned to it, I'd have to reintroduce myself to the universe of the story.

And that would take time.

So it wasn't until I moved here, I was living in Belgium, I read something about verse novels, and I can't remember exactly where, and I read one called *White Rose*, which I loved.

And it's by Kip Wilson, so you probably know Kip.

And I wrote to her and asked, you know, how do I do this?

And can you help me?

And she actually wrote me back.

And it kind of started from that, that someone inspires you.

And I looked at the novel, I thought, how can I take this apart and re-create it and make it flow in a way that makes sense to me?

So I attended the Whole Novel Workshop at the Highlights Foundation.

And there I, it's called the Whole Novel Workshop because everyone in the workshop has their entire novel read by the workshop leader.

And we read each other's works as well.

And that's very rare for most writing workshops.

So in that workshop, I would get instant feedback about something from the workshop leader.

And we had two people, Ashley Hope Perez and Nicole Valentine.

And Nicole was amazing in giving me feedback that was so precise that I would just go back to the room at the retreat center.

I don't know if any of you have been to the Highlights Retreat Center.

It's beautiful, peaceful, in the middle of nowhere in Pennsylvania.



And you just feel completely cared for.

You know, everything is taken care of.

And I was in the room and I would just work on it for six hours straight, go to sleep and wake up and go to the next workshop.

You know, I was, everything was related to the novel.

And re-entering its world that way made me realize it could be in verse.

And some suggestions from other people, other writers, was that I do it in first person.

It was not originally in first person.

It was in third person.

And that wasn't working either.

So it's been through a lot of different iterations.

And that's okay.

That's like slow food.

You know, there's a market for fast food, but there are also people who love slow food, and you can taste the difference.

And so I hope that's true with my novel, that you can taste the slow cooking that went into it.

Definitely worth the wait.

Oh, well, thank you.

I hope that's true.

But for me, that's the process.

It was very, it was slow, but in a way that really allowed me to dive deeper and deeper.

And the revision, to be honest, is what I love the most.

Well, we can't talk about a book about Haiti without acknowledging that as we are recording this, it came up in the presidential debate that Haitians, you know, there's far-right conspiracy theories and they're talking about Haitians in Ohio.

And I believe the specific allegation was they're eating cats and dogs, which was of course immediately debunked by the moderator.

But do you want to talk about that situation at all?

Absolutely, absolutely.

I think it's important for two reasons, that people pay attention to this kind of thing.

Because you know, it's one thing when an insult is just a childish insult, and we've seen plenty of that in the political world, and everywhere.

But this is a particularly powerful trope, because what you do by combining the Haitians with the idea of them eating pets, you have this implication that goes back to Voodoo, or Voodoo, and to zombies, which Hollywood sensationalized in the 1930s.

And that's associated with Haiti, as well as the idea that it's a chaotic place, it's a place of crime, it's a place of violence, and always has been.

And so Haitians eating domestic pets, which represent, you know, the animals you love and care for.

And if you want, it's kind of the America of peace and tranquility.

You're saying that something very evil is coming and taking over your town, the Midwestern town of Springfield, Ohio.

When in fact, these are legal workers who came because there were opportunities in this town, and these opportunities were advertised.

And just like most immigrants who arrived, people were looking for better opportunity.

That's what the Haitians in Springfield, Ohio were doing.

And so to demonize an entire group, that's something that's extremely, you know, and it needs to be unpacked.

The second part of it, of course, is demonizing immigrants.

The larger question and that's demonizing the other.

And that is also very dangerous because it can easily slide, you know, into violence.

We've seen that.

That's happened in, you know, in the past.

It happens around the world.

Um, so I think when I heard it and I was outraged as a lot of people were, but I tried to think, OK, I felt this kind of outrage before.

You know, anyone who is Haitian, we've seen the country maligned in so many different ways that there's a book called *The Uses of Haiti* by Paul Farmer.

And it goes into that.

So it's been hundreds of years that people have attacked Haiti.

And there are reasons for that.

They were afraid.

They were afraid that their own countries where they were enslaved people, would get the idea that it was all right to free themselves by fighting, which is what the Haitians did in 1804, declaring themselves a free and independent republic.

The only one to do so from slavery.

So yes, that scared a lot of people.

And so the mudslinging began way back then.

It continued, as I said, in the 30s, Hollywood added to it by having all the zombie, you know, the zombie craze.

And so this is not a surprise, but just I have to say that it does allow for people who, if they're outraged, take that outrage and learn something.

Go pick up a book by a Haitian writer.

Just read one book about Haiti, you know.

Go look at maybe the Haitian Studies Association website, which just has lots of resources.

And educate yourself, because this is a teachable moment.

And I hate to, you know, use that word lightly, because it's also more than that.

But part of this is that we can teach something.

The other part is, we have to fight against this kind of demonization of immigrants as a whole, but especially just of the other.

Whoever you label the other, if it's an immigrant, or someone you call quote unquote a socialist, or a communist, whatever label you're sticking on them, we have to really examine that.

And history helps us do that.

So the teaching of history is absolutely vital.

Reading historical fiction is a way to also dive into and learn about cultures that you may not be familiar with.

So I'm really glad that you are bringing this up.

It's painful on a personal level.

It's extremely painful.

But on the level of, okay, what can I do with that pain and how can I transform it, which is a theme of my novel, then, you know, if my characters can do it, I better try too.

Yes, yes.

And thank you so much for your website, which provides some resources to learn more about Haiti.

Oh, thank you.

Whenever I see comments that really jive with our sort of reason for being, the reason we like to read and discuss the banned books is exactly that.

They're generally banned because there's information that someone doesn't want everyone to have.

And knowing the history of Haiti is something I think people should read and can get from your book and the same for so many of the books that we have read.

That's yeah.

And that's why I'm so happy that you do this podcast and that you offer people this, you know, in a very potent way.

Because it's easy if you're not in a setting like a school or a library to forget the importance of those places, you know, to what you're you're exposed to, to what you're interested in, that libraries for me were a sanctuary, that I learned just a lot by browsing the shelves, you know.

And to have people threatened for the choices that they make and threatened for what they teach as well is very disturbing.

You know, my parents left the country because there was a dictatorship there.

And we were fortunate to be welcomed into Canada because they were looking for francophone immigrants in Quebec.

That was one reason.

But they had also a very different immigration policy than the US.

And then my father got a job in the US.

So that's how we ended up in the US.

But we were bullied for being Haitian.

I was, you know, I remember people saying that it was our fault, that there was AIDS, and that at that time, I believe the Red Cross did not allow Haitians to donate blood.

That was their official policy.

Haitians were detained at Krome Detention Center in horrific conditions.

And Brother I'm Dying by Edwidge Danticat is a book that I suggest everyone read if they want to have some sense of that history, which is recent.

It's not that long ago.

And, you know, I just think that the more you know, the less you fall prey to these sorts of, you know, slanderous, malicious, vicious rumors.

And misinformation is a euphemism.

I mean, they're, you know, disinformation, misinformation.

But yes, to have it repeated at the debate, I, yeah, I was really, I was kind of stunned.

And then I thought, okay, you know, how can we turn this around?

You know, as librarians, we understand the importance of having a platform where people can come and educate themselves widely, because we know that schools are limited.

They're, they're limited by politics.

They're limited by money.

They're limited by book banners and people who want to dictate what is taught in schools or not taught in many instances.

But, you know, what always boggles my mind is that Americans identify collectively as freedom loving people.

And what greater freedom can one have than the freedom to explore and educate yourself about whatever you want to learn about?

And it boggles my mind that people will be spoon fed information from one perspective and not think, oh, I need to seek out more about that.

And that's, you know, that's part of our mission here is to help people to understand that there's information out there.

Go find it.

You know, we all need to do that.

And thank and thank goodness you're doing that because, you know, we're living in what someone called the Age of Distraction.

You know, where I think even attention spans are being rewired by the way we interact with social media, but just that maybe spending time reading a book is something that some people don't want to do.

And I think that being spoon fed poison is even more dangerous because then there isn't someone searching or saying, okay, what's the alternative?

A lot of people will simply believe those little drips that they find, you know, in the nether corners of the Internet.

And those will be spread and those things do spread very quickly.

So, yes, thank goodness you're doing what you're doing.

And for every librarian out there, every teacher out there, thank you for what you do.

Well, and thank you for writing the books that we get to share with a wide audience.

The next question we had for you, Nadine, is why did you decide to write about what life was like in Haiti in the 1930s?

And I know you've already spoken a good deal about it, but is there anything else you'd like to add?

Yes, there is.

I was drawn to that through Zora Neale Hurston's book, *Tell My Horse*, which is about her fieldwork as an anthropologist in Haiti from 1936 to 1937.

And in that time period, in a few weeks, she says, she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

But she also started her memoir, and her memoir is called *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

And then she wrote *Tell My Horse*, which is a sort of hybrid work of, it's supposed to be anthropology, but people have trouble classifying it.

But within that book, there was a Haitian woman, or young woman, I pictured her, named Lucille.

And Lucille is an epigraph of Zora's book.

And it's a very nice dedication.

I wish I could pull it up right here, but I don't have it.

But essentially it says how much Lucille was a best friend to her and that she would, you know, do, she would admit the world and she was kind.

And then there was a line about, and I would trust her with the US Treasury, which is an interesting line to have.

And immediately I thought of, you know, Zora exists in many different ways.

Some people see her as, you know, an icon and other people see her as, you know, I mean, she has lots of different roles that she plays within our society.

But one of them is as a trickster.

And one of them is the way she uses irony.

And the whole line about the US Treasury, to me, immediately brought forth the occupation.

Because one excuse for the occupation was to get Haiti's quote unquote finances in order and it involved seizing assets and the Treasury of Haiti.

So for her to say that in her epigraph made me think, okay, you know, so first of all, let me reread it with another lens.

And secondly, let me see if I can find out who Lucille was, you know, and there was very, very little.

There are a few scenes that involve her.

So I started to try to do some research and see if I could find anything on the real person.

I could not.

And because of that, and because I just thought, you know, Zora has been centered now in the canon of literature.

I think it's time for Lucille's voice to be heard and it's her story.

And I wanted her story to be heard.

And that's why it's from her point of view.

That's wonderful.

What was it like to make a real person and such a famous person, a character in your novel?

Was that challenging or did you, or was it fun to imagine what they were like in the world of your novel?

Well, I remember what I said earlier.

I definitely like taking the harder way.

If there's an easy way and the hard way, I'll go for the hard way.

So the little side road, lots of thickets, you have to go through the bushes.

That's kind of what it was like because honestly, when you have a real life character, you can easily be intimidated.

And especially if they're well known and well loved.

It was intimidating.

So what I really had to do was think to myself, okay, I am looking at her through Lucille's eyes.

How does she appear to me?

You know, I had to get out of the way and allow Zora to appear as she would to Lucille.

And that was fun.

So that part was fun, but it was challenging.

We loved how amazingly you immersed us in Lucille's world.

Thank you.

And that's important to me.

Yeah, yeah.



And you mentioned before the difference between fast food and slow food.

And you talk a lot about the delicious foods that Lucille describes making.

And we're just, you know, you have this incredible ability to bring to life details in each of your scenes, to just really immerse us in Haiti.

And can you just talk about that process for us a little bit?

Well, you can tell I like food because I always focus, if I can, on something, you know, because it's life, isn't it?

It's what nourishes us.

It's what we have turned into an art form, some people.

It's the way of showing love.

It's how we gather as family.

So, to me, food is always important.

And in whatever I read, I look for food in it, you know?

I look for cues about food, you know?

If the characters are not eating, it bothers me.

You know?

They should be eating at least one meal in the novel.

So, my, you know, description of the food really just came from my love of food and the people who prepare it, who often, at least in my family, growing up, it was women, you know?

My mom and my aunts and my grandmother.

And during the preparation of the food, there'd be talking and gossip.

So, the preparation itself was a part of this beautiful social exchange and bonding, you know, and giving and receiving love.

So, I really think this novel is about different kinds of love.

And one of them would be love of the natural world, because, you know, the Mapou tree plays an important role, but also the love of things that we sometimes take for granted.

And food can be one of those things, but I, you know, am happy to hear that those things stood out to you.

And those details to me were some of the most fun that I had writing, because, you know, the sensory details and food being an important part of the culture, it had to be in my novel.

In addition to the descriptions of food, we also loved your descriptions of what it was like for Lucille to carve things out of wood.

And there are so many gorgeous images in your novel.

Would you mind telling us about the significance of the Mapou in Haiti and how you chose for both trees and wood carving to be important parts of Lucille's life?

Okay, so the Mapou tree, you know, in many different cultures, there are trees that have different symbols and different meanings and carry different sorts of weight if you want.

And the Mapou tree was and is known within traditional Haitian culture as a resting place for the ancestors, for the spirit of the ancestors.

So it was actually forbidden to cut them down.

And they often appeared near cemeteries or near other spots that become important gathering places.

So I just started to see the tree as a character.

As far back as we've gone, and people have had trees around them, I think they've understood that these are special, I think.

There is a reverence for them, and that reverence is very...

It's pronounced in this book partly because of what's happened since, and the deforestation of Haiti was in the forefront of my mind.

So it's two things.

It's really looking at the spiritual aspect of our relationship with trees, but also looking at the commercial aspect and the aspect of how then they were commodified, how people, to survive, cut them down, how that increased the risk of mudslides during rainy seasons, more people being injured and hurt.

So there's a whole ricochet effect when one part is changed and that is the connection to the natural world, when that becomes an exploitative connection instead of one of respect or reverence.

So yeah, that's probably a long answer to your question.

It could have been shorter.

No, that's wonderful.

Thank you.

It's a beautiful answer.

If you view the ancestors as having a real influence in our lives, then you can't cut down the tree where they might come.

That was the idea that this tree should not be cut.

So that's a very important moment in the novel when she goes and finds that her favorite Mapou tree has been cut.

So I have her interested in carving because of her connection with the tree.

I wanted to ask about Lucille's best friend, is Fafina, is that how you say it?

Tell us a little bit more about that character and how you decided to include her.

Yeah.

Well, actually, there is a very classic book called Popo and Fafina, which was written by Langston Hughes and Arnaut Bonton in the 1930s.

And so, you know, Langston Hughes, a poet who first became known in the Harlem Renaissance, but whose poetry is really, you know, really well known now.

And I read that book and it was just a slice of life of children in Haiti.

And I loved the name Fafina and I just thought, okay, if Lucille was going to have a friend, what would the friend be like and how would that friendship evolve?

And that's how Fafina came about.

It was almost that she just as a character, she just started to form herself and be herself.

So she started as a more minor character and actually more, she became more and more important to the story as I went back and returned and revised.

So that's very interesting that you ask about her.

Yeah.

I mean, she's, she's so ever present, even though she's absent for much of the book.

Oh, well, that's perfect.

Thank you.

I'm glad that you feel that because that is part of, you know, what I wanted is that sense that she's always present, you know, even though she physically isn't.

Another one of our favorite characters is Oreste, the son of Lucille's employer.

How did you create Oreste's character?

And to what extent were Haitians like Oreste fighting for people's rights after the American occupation ended in 1934?

Well, that's, you know, that's, I'm really glad you're asking that question because Oreste to me was a character that was loosely based on some Haitian intellectuals and leaders, like Charlemagne Peralt, by the way, the one who was captured and killed.

And he was a leader of a group called the CACO, and the CACO were guerrilla fighters who were fighting the Marines who were occupying Haiti in that time period.

So Peralt was from a very well-known family.

And Jacques Roumain was the same.

He was from a very, you know, what's called une grande famille, a big family.

And the class divide is very important in so many societies, even if people don't want to admit that.

And in Haiti, that was absolutely different.

And so a country that freed itself from slavery did not free itself from the class divide.

And the story of Oreste is that he is like this intellectual Jacques Roumain, who he, you know, he is friends with him in the novel.

But in fact, I drew on his background.

I drew a little bit on other people that I've known, other people in history, and also thought a little bit about how my father, the school that he attended because he attended the most elite school in Haiti.

And it was run by, you know, European, I believe, I don't want to say monks because then they'd be in a monastery, but, you know, brothers of Christian instruction maybe.

So it was an education that had its pluses and minuses, put it that way.

So I tried to imagine a situation in which, you know, which we don't have to imagine that much, do we?

That, you know, one's history is not being taught at all.

And that was the case for almost every French former colony, or départements, as we call them.

So Martinique, Guadeloupe, those other places, that they were still being taught French history.

And there was a very, you know, famous book, history book that they would all recite from.

And during the 30s, a movement grew against this.

And the movement was just to say, no, we have our own history.

Why can't that be taught?

Why is that not also a part of what people learn?

So Oreste is that character.

And Fafina and Lucille want to create a school where that is a case, where that history can be taught.

I really resonated with that particular statement of Oreste.

Well, it just felt to be like the same thing that's happening with books being banned, is that they don't want people to know their own histories.

Yeah.

And it's, I mean, it's not a new thing.

So it's not that I looked at that and thought, okay, I'm going to write that.

It's that it came from stories that I'd heard from people who said, yeah, this is the way we were taught.

There's a really good book called Black Shack Alley by Joseph Zobel, which I think is set in Martinique during the 30s.

And they made a film called Sugar Cane Alley.

And it's directed by Usain Palsi.

So that is a wonderful film to see.

It's a, you know, in the same time period, also about education, also about someone who is from a poorer background versus someone who's from an elite background, but they become friends.

And what happens when they both attend this school?

So there were a lot of sources.

I mean, yeah, this is based in reality.

You know, I like to say fact-based historical fiction because a lot of it is fact.

But I was not, you know, what's happened since that wasn't happening when I wrote the character of Oreste.

Well, I have another question about Zora Neale Hurston, or Mamzelle, as Lucille calls her.

And as you mentioned earlier, she's interested in learning more about Haitian voodoo as part of her anthropological research.

Can you tell us a little bit more about what Hurston learned about religion in Haiti at that time?

And you also mentioned that Americans tended to sensationalize Haitian beliefs in the 1930s.

But could you also tell us a little bit more about what that looks like?

There's, well, that's partly what her book *Tell My Horses* about.

So I would say that, you know, she, as an anthropologist, had a genuine curiosity.

She wanted to understand the whole structure, if you want to call it, the belief system that brought about this religion, that has elements of several Western African religions, but has its own way of doing things, and brings in elements from the Catholic Church.

So it's a very, to anthropologists especially, a very interesting, I think the term they use is syncretic, you know, religion.

And she once wrote to her sponsor, the Guggenheim Foundation, and those letters actually have copies of, they sent them to me.

She wrote to Mr.

Henry Mo about her progress and said, it's really hard to write about, you know, this belief system in Haiti because I'm trying to fit an entire cosmology on something the size of a postcard, and I can't do it.

It's just too complicated.

And she understood the complexity and respected that and studied, I believe, to become a priestess.

You know, I don't know if she was a Mambo or not.

She might have been, you know, there are different stories about that.

She, I believe, already did that in Louisiana, but that would be a different kind of study.

So her real interests came as an anthropologist, but also because she wanted to understand the science behind zombies.

And zombie, properly in Creole, this was something that she knew had already fascinated, you know, the writers who would come back from Haiti.

So there was a book called, oh, I can't write it up, I remember, but it was by Richard Seabrook, Magic Island or something like that.

But, you know, it was a book that was very sensationalized.

And, you know, the movies that she knew that this existed, it was in the air.

And what she thought is, I want to get to the truth of this.

I want to understand really, you know, if the zombies really exist, how are they created?

What's the process?

And so her investigation of this, I have as a driving part of the plot, led her into trouble because that was not necessarily what people wanted studied for several reasons.

You know, people who were encouraging tourism, and there was a flourishing tourist industry in Haiti at that time.

People like Errol Flynn, you know, would spend time in Hollywood, you know, so Jamaica, Haiti, they would go and spend their time there.

So you have to remember that it's a very different Haiti than what most people see on the news, because now what people see is you only see Haiti if it's catastrophe, you know, if it's violence, if it's, but it existed in a very different way in the 1930s, and that's another reason I wanted to write about that period.

So what I thought is, okay, Zora, what if she was right?

Because in her letter, she says, I think, you know, people are trying to poison me or I feel that they're trying to stop my work.

And, you know, she felt that it was because she was getting close to finding the secret of zombies.

And in fact, she was getting close to that.

You know, and later on, another anthropologist became famous for talking about the actual process and what is used.

You know, it's a chemical from, I believe, a kind of fish.

His name is Wade Davis.

He was at Harvard and he wrote a book called *The Serpent and the Rainbow*.

When a movie was made of that, and it's also kind of sensationalistic, but it is based on more of the fact behind the research.

So he, if people really want to know more about the science of it, there are sources, and in fact, one of my friends was a character in that movie, and she was a real priestess, Rachel Beauvoir, and sadly she's passed away, but she was a character in this book and in this movie, they based a character on her.

Her father was an engineer in France and called back by the family to run the temple.

These things were not as exoticized as they've been made to be.

It's, again, this feeling that if you demonize an entire people and their religion and belief systems of the tradition, you know, it would be like saying all Catholics are this, you know, all people of this background.

So I wanted Zora to be a genuine investigator in this, that she's trying to uncover a mystery.

And we're going along with her, but that as she's doing it, and there is danger from different sources.

And that to me was, I feel that that was based in fact, you know.

So it's hard because we don't have her field notebooks.

There is no record from her perspective of what she did in Haiti.

So we have a few letters that she wrote from Haiti.

And I, you know, looked carefully at those letters.

I talked to the editor of those letters, but there's no notebook.

And generally anthropologists have notebooks of the people they interviewed, what they saw, what they witnessed.

And she had those for other places, but not for Haiti.

So there again, I was allowed to fill in and use my imagination for what I thought might be going on.

And I wanted her to get close, but not to be able to solve what was going on.



And I wanted her to bring Lucille in as an unwilling participant, because there were plenty of people who did not want to be involved and who believed the Catholic Church, which said that this was extremely dangerous and that the drums even from the temples should be seized, should be taken away.

So drumming in itself became something that was an act of defiance.

So I think I've in that chapter, Drums in the Night, where that's one of the poems, that was an actual scene from Zora's book Tell My Horse.

So some of the scenes with Lucille were scenes that were lightly sketched in Tell My Horse, and there are two or three.

That's one of them.

And I had to think, okay, what would the scene be from Lucille's point of view?

You know, in the middle of the night, when Zora's saying, I want to go out there and see what's causing this.

I want to follow the drums.

And, you know, how would Lucille get her not to do that?

So that was fun.

I mean, in that sense, when you create characters, you're delving into psychology.

You're trying to understand something from a point of view.

Obviously, that isn't your point of view, but every character has some of you as well.

So, and in fact, I had a really great writing teacher who said to me, if you're going to write a villain, so there is a villain in this, right?

I mean, if you're going to write a villain, make sure that that villain has one character aspect that you have, because you should have empathy for all of your characters.

If you don't, your villain is a flat character, your villain is of no interest as a real character.

Yeah.

That's fascinating.

Thank you so much for telling us more about your research process too and how, and I had no idea that they did not have, that there's no record of her notes from that time.

Yes.

That's exactly what allowed me to be so free in inventing.

That's so cool.

Yeah.

We just would like to know why you felt it was so important and is so important to write and share stories about people and places that don't normally get told.

And I know we've talked about the histories that don't get told, but I wanted to give you another opportunity to expand on that some more.

You know, I think one reason is exactly how we started, you know, so that people do not get othered and demonized.

Because the less you know about people, the more likely it is that you can do that.

You know, when a person is a blank to you, it's either it's very easy to project all sorts of terrible things on them, they're a blank screen.

And there are people that if they're presented enough in ways that are demeaning, or in situations that are catastrophic, what the mind does to deal with that is just kind of put them aside as just, you know, there's compassion fatigue almost, it's almost like, I can't see these people as individuals with their own inner lives.

I see them as a group.

And as a group, it's much easier to then paint the entire group in a very negative way.

So my feeling was always to try to give each character a very, you know, a very pronounced inner life, but especially Lucille.

And especially at that time, because this time was a time when Haiti was on the brink of developing a very flourishing civil society.

So these intellectuals did exist, you know, half of the people at Madame Ovid's dinner party were real people, including the anthropologists who most people don't know.

There were Haitian anthropologists, Haitian professors, Haitian journalists, writers, you know, but that isn't taught in most, in most instances.

And so the little that people, the little that a lot of American people know about Haiti does not include this.

And to me, that makes it easier for the kind of demonization that we're seeing to happen.

Because there is nothing that fills that with knowledge.

There is nothing that creates empathy.

You know, if you don't know about a person's past, it's harder to have empathy, because you can't make the connections to your own experience.

If you don't imagine that people have an inner life, then it's very hard to have empathy, because you just imagine that they're reacting to, you know, catastrophic situations all the time.

You don't stop and think.

They have dreams.

They wake up in the morning.

They have things they're thinking about.

They go to bed at night dreaming of something, wishing for things, longing for things.

And that's really what I wanted to do, is just to create characters that make us feel that.

And, you know, in the larger sense, it's about cultivating the moral imagination, just the ability to walk in someone else's shoes, but to see the world, you know, as much as possible from their vantage point.

And that can never be perfect.

That can never be, you know, something that isn't problematic.

But it's something that I try to do, and that we, when I say we, writers of fiction, try to do in general.

So, yeah.

Well, thanks so much for talking with us.

Would you like to tell our listeners where they can find you online?

Yes, they can find me online at my website, [nadinepinede.com](http://nadinepinede.com), and also on Instagram, again, just the handle is my name, and on Facebook.

And on my website, there is a section with a lot of information, that if you want to read books by Haitian writers and read, for example, or find out more about this period of time, but also the Haitian Revolution, which a lot of people are interested in.

So I put that, I think, under reframing Haiti because it's important to reframe the way people see a country that's been misrepresented for so long.

So I encourage you to go to that part of my website and find something that interests you.

And let me put in a plug for an incredibly beautiful picture book called Freedom Soup, which is about a special soup that we eat back to food on January 1st.

And it is because it celebrates Haiti's freedom, you know, declared a republic on the 1st of January, 1804.

But also the generosity, this soup was supposed to be given freely to anyone who asked for it.

And it's called Soup Jumon.

And, you know, it's part of it.

I think, you know, I describe it in here in my novel, but it's part of Haitian culture in such a strong way that it connects Haitians, you know, diaspora, people in different countries.

They all know what this is, this particular dish.

So I want to say this picture book is a wonderful exploration of it.

And I'm a believer that you never grow out of picture books.

There are beautiful books of illustrated books for all ages.

And this one is particularly good because it covers the history in a way that it's fun.

You know, history should be fun.

I love history.

I enjoy it.

I think some people have seen the pleasure drained out of it.

And part of why I wrote this was to bring the pleasure back to history and to make it vivid and to make you feel like you're there at that moment and not that it's, you know, far away distant and in grainy black and white film.

Oh, absolutely.

And I just have to say, Nadine, I read that book at one of my story times at the Public Library.

Wonderful.

And I am so happy.

Such a delight.

And I connected with the joy of learning how to cook from my mom and my grandma as I was reading it and the kids loved it.

And it was a beautiful story.

Well, shout out to Tammy Charles, who wrote that and is published by Candlewick Press, who is publishing my novel.

So, you know, there are great things out there and people respond.

And I think that rather than giving more oxygen to the terrible things, you know, the things that cause harm, I believe in giving oxygen to what can bring us together and what can connect us and cultivate empathy.

Wonderful.

Well, Nadine, thank you so much for talking with us today.

We loved reading your beautiful book and it is just so much more meaningful to learn why it's so important to you and to learn some of the background of how you wrote this book.

So thank you for spending your time with us today.

Thank you.

It was so much fun.

I really enjoyed it.

And, you know, I hope that we'll, you know, get to meet somehow and our paths will cross.

It was a pleasure, really.

We loved talking with Nadine Pinede.

You can find Nadine's website and social media links in the show notes.

You can also pre-order her novel wherever books are sold.

And as a reminder, it comes out December 3rd.

She also mentioned to us after we stopped recording that she is doing an Instagram live with the Zora Neale Hurston Foundation on September 18th.

And because this episode is not coming out before then, you will be able to find it online because presumably they are recording it.

So you can learn a lot more about Zora Neale Hurston, who as we discussed, plays a big role in this novel.

And if you would like to leave a question or comment for us, including maybe how to find her Instagram live once this episode is released, please visit us at [theroguelibrarians.com](http://theroguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook.

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And finally, thank you to all of those who have helped us to get this podcast off the ground, and to continue for going on two years.

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We absolutely could not have done this podcast without you or any of the folks that I just mentioned.

And finally, thank you readers for being with us and for reading with us because Books are meant to be read.