

Rogue Librarians, Bonus Episode
Author Lyn Miller-Lachmann

Please note: this transcript was auto-generated by Apple Podcasts.

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

We are your hosts, Marion, Dorothy, and Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians.

We would love for you to participate in our discussion.

Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook at Rogue Librarians Pod.

Today, we are excited to share our interview with Lyn Miller-Lachmann about her new young adult novel, *Eyes Open*.

Lyn is an educator, an editor, and an author of young adult and middle grade novels, including *Torch*, winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and *Moonwalking*.

Fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, and English, she enjoys traveling to new places and lived part-time in Lisbon, Portugal for many years.

She lives in New York City.

Eyes Open has received several pieces of advanced praise, including two starred reviews from Kirkus Reviews and Booklist.

Booklist wrote, quote, beautifully and fluidly written, Miller-Lachmann's memorable verse novel captures the setting splendidly, dramatizing the abysmal condition of women under the dictatorship, end quote.

Kirkus Reviews wrote, quote, the verse format allows Sonia's poetic voice to shine, drawing readers into the stark reality she's dealing with.

Although her head can be clouded by wine and soft kisses, she knows her own mind and speaks up.

And she says, I am a daughter of Eve who thinks, questions, dreams, conveys harshness, beauty and lingering hope, end quote.

Eyes Open is such a beautiful book and we are thrilled that we had the opportunity to talk to Lyn about it.

It was so much fun to read the book and it's also a challenging read because so many hard things happen in it, but it's beautifully done and the story is compelling and the characters just draw you in as well as the setting as one of the reviews noted.

And I learned so much about what life was like in Portugal in the 1960s from this novel and just really enjoyed the poetry.

And getting to talk with Lyn just made everything so much richer for me.

I just loved learning how she came across this information, how she did the research, how she created the characters, where her story ideas originally came from.

So it was just so wonderful to have a chance to talk with her about it.

What did the two of you think?

Well, I completely agree.

And I learned so much.

I mean, this is a part of history that I never knew anything about.

And I have been to Portugal and spent three weeks in the country.

But to learn about this other part of history, especially about a country that I've been to before, was just really, well, shall I say, eye-opening.

Nice.

It was really good.

And I love the power of women in this book.

It's just a really amazing read and highly recommended.

And talking to Lyn was just a delight.

Dorothy, what do you think?

Oh, she was just so passionate about the causes that she believes in and the history that she's relaying.

Everything that you guys said, obviously, it was a whole history lesson.

And as was reading the book, which I really, just really enjoyed.

So yeah, fantastic.

Well, on that note, should we head to the interview then?

We should.

I think that's definitely the place to go.

All right.

Well, then without further ado, here is our interview with Lyn Miller-Lachmann about her new novel and verse, *Eyes Open*.

Lyn, thanks so much for joining us on *Rogue Librarians*.

Well, thank you for having me.

I am honored to be part of the *Rogue Librarian Podcast*.

Thank you, we're so excited to have you here.

And congratulations on the May 7th release of your new novel, *Eyes Open*.

Well, thank you very much.

Yes, this has been a long road, and I am so happy to see that this novel is going to be read by people.

And it already has been read by the three of us.

And we loved it.

Yes, we did indeed.

Yes, we did.

It's such a beautiful book.

Well, we can't wait to discuss it with you.

We wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your background first though.

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

Well, I think one of the most influential was one I read.

I think it was toward the end of high school, maybe when I was in college already, and it was *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier.

This is a portrayal of a teenager standing up to corrupt and absolute power.

And that's really something that has attracted me all the way through my life because, well, I have seen a lot of corrupt and absolute power.

Initially, a reluctant activist, but ultimately, Jerry follows his moral compass despite the consequences because the powerful don't like to be challenged.

So for decades, this was one of the most banned books in the United States.

And we're now in another wave of book banning.

So, you know, I'm really pleased to be able to call attention to this book that came out in the 1970s.

And I also honored this book by making it the favorite book of my character, JJ in Moonwalking, the novel in verse I wrote with Zetta Elliott a couple of years ago.

Even though reading The Chocolate War has gotten JJ into trouble in his own Catholic school.

Well, I've read that book.

It's very powerful.

That was the book that really made me want to write YA fiction.

Huh, well that's fantastic because that plays right into our next question, which is how did you become a writer?

Well, I started making up stories before I even knew how to write them down.

I was six years old and in first grade and was really lost in my first grade classroom.

It was a very strange place for me.

I didn't realize at the time, but as an adult, I was diagnosed on the autism spectrum and it explained a lot of why I didn't fit in.

But making up stories in first grade was a way of understanding my world and a way of controlling a world that was really out of control for me.

So I was in a class of 24 students and I made up my own class of 24 students and I gave them all names and they were all my friends.

And it was, you know, as I said, a way of learning about my world.

Now, historical fiction, I majored in history and I went to graduate school for a couple of years, ended up dropping out, but I never wanted to write historical fiction.

I just wanted the facts.

And, you know, being autistic, I can be very literal about that.

But one of the other books that really revolutionized the way I thought about writing is the work of Howard Zinn.

And realizing that a lot of the stories of history are untold because they're not the stories of the elite and the textbooks and the scholarly works really, especially at that time, focused mainly on elites, on the movers and shakers, but you didn't really get to see the voices of ordinary people.

And there wasn't necessarily the documentation of ordinary people.

So fiction really was a way of both doing the research, but then inventing and understanding the experiences and the feelings and the thoughts of ordinary people who are typically left out of the history books.

I think that's what was so powerful about *Grapes of Wrath*.

Absolutely.

Another book I love.

You kind of started to touch on this a little bit, but we saw on your website that you are a member of Authors Against Book Bands.

So would you mind telling our listeners just a little bit more about this organization and the important work that you are doing?

Well, it's basically authors standing up for intellectual freedom.

Many of our colleagues have been banned.

And people say, well, if you're banned, you're gonna sell a whole bunch of books.

And maybe that happens for about 10 authors, but there are like a thousand authors who've been banned or a thousand books that have been banned.

And most of those do not benefit from being banned.

And authors rely on school visits to help make a living.

And the authors who are being banned are also being disinvited for school visits.

So I think it's really important that we authors stand together.

Whether or not our books have been banned, we need to speak out against the censorship of all of us, because an injury to one is an injury to all of us.

I'm especially motivated to join this organization because my novels, particularly *Torch and Eyes Open*, are set in countries that ban books.

And *Sonia and Eyes Open*, her boyfriend, Zé Miguel, is in prison, is an actual prison, for distributing banned materials against a dictatorship.

And right now, we're reading here in the United States, where librarians are being threatened with prison for distributing materials that are banned.

So, yeah, what kind of country does this sort of thing?

That's a good question.

Agreed.

Yeah, definitely.

I mean, a lot of what you're saying is why we, the three of us, formed *Rogue Librarians*, because we were incensed with the uptick and banning that happened during COVID in particular.

So, yes.

Well, thank you for that.

Well, in addition, so many of the books that are being banned are ones about our history.

And, you know, as though they just don't want people to know the actual facts about what happens in this country.

So, you know, I can see that a particular interest of yours based on your books.

So maybe this is a good time.

We could give the listeners an introduction to your book, *Eyes Open*.

Well, *Eyes Open* is a verse novel from the point of view of Sonia, the second of five daughters in a family that runs a restaurant featuring live music, Fado music in Lisbon, Portugal.

It's 1966, 1967, four decades, in other words, two full generations into a right-wing dictatorship.

And that means Sonia has grown up under that dictatorship and so have her parents and her grandmother.

Now, Sonia dreams of writing poetry in children's books that her activist boyfriend, Zé Miguel, will illustrate.

Many of her poems honor Zé Miguel's activism and her desire to rise above the restrictions against women in her country.

But when he's arrested and her family's restaurant is shut down for hiring a band singer, she has to work a grim, dangerous job in a hotel laundry.

When she and other workers start to be injured on the job, she has to decide between writing poetry to honor a hero or stepping up to become a hero herself in spite of all the risks of doing so in that kind of regime.

Wow, that's a wonderful description and it is such a powerful story.

So how did you decide to write about this topic, particularly about what life was like in Portugal in the 1960s?

Well, I moved to Portugal in 2012 and lived there with my husband for four months because he received a Fulbright to teach at a graduate institute of the University of Lisbon.

And then we continued to spend time in Portugal.

We spent about two months in Portugal every year from then until the, through 2019, until the pandemic hit.

And in the apartment where we stayed in 2012, I was learning Portuguese.

I was taking a class in Portuguese for immigrants.

And I knew that reading would be an excellent way of immersing myself in the language.

And I'm really good at picking up languages in terms of reading.

Now speaking, that's a different story.

But I can read and write in Portuguese.

And I encountered a book that featured testimonies of political prisoners incarcerated at Al Jube prison, which was a prison right in the middle of a busy neighborhood near downtown Lisbon.

And that prison, it was a secret prison.

It was one of those prisons that was, you know, people could be living right next door to it and did not know that they were living next door to people who were arrested, interrogated and tortured.

And in fact, the inmates at Al Jube prison were not allowed to make noise.

And if they made noise, they would be beaten.

Now this prison was closed in 1965 because a lot of prisoners escaped from it.

And so it wasn't the prison that was featured in my book, but it was a prison where a lot of people who opposed this right wing dictatorship and also prisoners who had advocated for the independence of Portugal's colonies in Africa were incarcerated there.

And reading about that and what happened and learning about what happened in Portugal under the dictatorship of Antonio Salazar connected to my interest in writing about young people resisting authoritarian regimes and becoming activists.

And those, I'd already written two novels for young readers about that topic, Gringo Landia, which came out in 2009, which is set during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.

And it's about a refugee teenager whose father is a political prisoner under the Pinochet dictatorship.

And then Torch, which was published in 2022.

And it's about three teenagers living in Czechoslovakia under Soviet occupation.

That's fascinating.

And I think it's wonderful that you are bringing to light these stories, especially for an American audience, so that we understand what life was like for so many people in these different places.

Right.

And I think it's especially timely today because, you know, we're facing a political candidate who is openly calling for an authoritarian regime.

He wants to be a dictator.

He wants to be a Pinochet or Salazar or Franco.

And, you know, this is what life was like for ordinary people under these dictatorships.

And I'll talk a little bit more about that later, I'm sure.

But, you know, one thing I want to point out is that once you, once a dictator has been installed, it is very difficult to get rid of them.

The dictatorship in Portugal lasted 48 years.

I mentioned before that Sonia, her parents, her grandparents all grew up under this dictatorship.

Wow.

So you can't put in a dictator and say, well, he's only going to be a dictator for a day, or if we don't like him, we'll get rid of him.

That doesn't happen.

Getting rid of dictators is a long, difficult and bloody process.

Yeah, for sure.

And many times what replaces the one dictatorship just turns into another different one.

That's not necessarily a way out.

I mean, if you look at Syria, for instance.

Yeah, that's true.

Lyn, you mentioned that you had just returned from a trip to Lisbon to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution.

Could you tell our listeners more about what the Carnation Revolution is and some of what you experienced during this recent trip?

Absolutely.

And you just mentioned about the fact that when dictatorships fall, that often what replaces them is more of the same.

Well, Portugal is one of the happy exceptions to that.

The Carnation Revolution, which occurred on April 25th, 1974, was in fact a military uprising, a military coup, because Portugal had been mired for almost two decades in colonial wars to maintain their colonies in different parts of Africa.

And a lot of the officers were not in favor of maintaining these colonies, and they were not in favor of continuing the dictatorship.

And the other thing is, is that the Communist Party, the Portuguese Communist Party, had to some extent one of their strategies, because the party was illegal, and their activists, if they were caught, were arrested and sent to prison for many years, activists like Zé Miguel, or sent to concentration camps in Cabo Verde.

There was a notorious concentration camp there called Tarrafal.

Well, the Communist Party had decided to request or send their young men, their young activists into the army.

And that along with the exposure of military officials to independence leaders in Africa led the army to decide that this dictatorship had been there long enough and was undermining the country.

The beginning of the uprising on the morning of April 25th, 1974 brought out, interestingly, it brought out ordinary people in droves.

As soon as the rebels, the captains, as they were known as, had declared that they were going to get rid of the government, people in Lisbon basically just came out of their houses and filled the streets in support of this rebellion.

Oh, wow.

What had happened is these ordinary people had been terrorized into silence.

But now that they saw that part of the military was on their side, and when other military officials and other soldiers saw that, you know, these rebels were going to get them out of being drafted and sent to these wars in Africa, they turned on the government.

And so, essentially, the dictator, Salazar, had died.

He was replaced by a man named Marcelo Caetano, had fewer and fewer supporters as the day went on, and more and more people out in the streets calling for them to step down and either be arrested or leave the country.

Now, it's called the Carnation Revolution because the carnation, a spring flower, some of the people who came out of their houses had bought carnations and put them into the guns of the soldiers to show that those guns would never again be used against the people.

What a beautiful image.

It is.

And I actually have an image of that.

I went to see an exhibit when I was in Lisbon at the National Guard headquarters, and they have an actual machine gun with the carnation that was put into it.

Oh, cool.

And so I also witnessed the 40th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution in 2014 and now the 50th.

And one of the things I noticed when I was in Portugal was a change in themes, because in 2014, Portugal was still suffering from the global economic crisis that began in 2008.

So a lot of people were talking about issues like inequality and lack of economic opportunities and precarious existence for young people.

But in 2024, the theme was definitely the rise in authoritarianism and threats to democracy.

Well, is there anything else you want to tell us about the research process for the book?

Yes, that it really helps a lot to know another language.

Because, yeah, I always compare, you know, I always think about the image of knowing another language.

It's like having a key to a secret room.

And in the case of this book, there is just not a lot written in English.

But I was able to research the book using sources in Portuguese, beginning with these testimonies of political prisoners.

The downside of that is that in my author's note, I wanted to give a list of books for further reading, and there is not a whole lot that people can read.

But I do have, later on, I'll talk about some books that I recommend.

However, in addition to reading these books in Portuguese, I went to museums, including one in that old urban prison, Aljube.

It's now the Aljube Museum of Resistance and Liberation.

And I recommend that everybody who travels to Lisbon see that museum.

And I think it's also a really good museum for teenagers.

There's a lot there that I think would be of interest to teenagers.

I also went to the Fado Museum because, well, my main character, her family owns a Fado restaurant.

Fado, spelled F-A-D-O, is a uniquely Portuguese musical genre, often compared to the blues.

It's a working class musical style.

The other thing I did was go to museums in small towns outside Lisbon that were centers of revolutionary activity.

And I did a lot of just walking around some of these old neighborhoods where my characters may have lived or visited.

There's, you know, a lot to take in when you're just walking the streets.

Yes.

And I think you can tell how much experience you have with what Lisbon is like in your book.

One of the things I loved so much about it was how rich the settings were.

Like I could picture the family restaurant and the prison and the laundry hut really well.

So how did you choose which locations to set the scenes within?

And how did you create such a detailed sense of place within each poem?

Well, the Fado restaurant that the family owns, I mean, Fado is just so important to Portuguese culture.

And a restaurant with live Fado music puts that place at the cultural center of the community.

The other thing is that Fado was heavily censored during the dictatorship.

For instance, the band singer, there's a band singer in *Eyes Open*, that the Fado restaurant brings him in and he sings a band song, and that's why the restaurant is shut down.

He is based on a real singer-songwriter at the juncture of Fado and protest music.

His name is Jose Zeca Afonso, whose song *Granda la Vila Morena* played over the radio in the wee hours of the morning served as a signal for the Carnation Revolution to begin.

So research, spending a lot of time in these, I spent a lot of time in these Fado restaurants in Lisbon's Alfama neighborhood, taking pictures.

I also read a book by one of my husband's colleagues in Lisbon who had, before he became a sociologist, he had been an amateur Fado performer.

And he wrote a sociological book on the importance of Fado in Portuguese culture.

So, *The Prison*.

Eyes Open wasn't the first YA novel I tried to write about this period in Portugal.

Sonia was a secondary character in an earlier attempt in prose from the point of view of Zé Miguel's older sister Rosalia, who's the best friend of Sonia's older sister Mariana.

The Poetry Club, the poem Sonia and her friends write for Zé Miguel after he's arrested.

And Sonia's spreading the rumor that Mariana called the secret police on Zé Miguel were all part of this earlier book.

And that earlier book, I did a lot of research in the Al Jube Museum because it had several scenes of his older sister visiting him in prison.

In addition to going to that museum, I read an account of a woman activist who was incarcerated at Acheus Prison, which is outside of Lisbon, which is not open to the public.

But that happens to be the prison where Zé Miguel was incarcerated.

And this woman who was in that prison actually helped some prisoners escape.

And so that kind of gave me an idea for one of the plot strands in Eyes Open is from this woman's memoir of being in prison and then she lived in exile.

Now the laundry shed.

In that first failed manuscript, Sonia's mother and Mariana get a job in a posh hotel after the authorities closed the family's restaurant.

But when Sonia is forced to leave school, she ends up in an even worse job at the hotel because of what her parents see as her insolence.

And she's offsite, so her mother doesn't even have to work with her because her mother is like really angry with her.

It's basically a punishment job.

And most of the laundry facilities were offsite because the center of the city was built up and crowded.

And some of the laundries were even in convents.

So in researching the laundry shed where Sonia works, I saw photos of offsite and convent laundry facilities of that era.

And in fact, I spent a lot of time looking at historical photos and a lot of that research.

I mean, it was like hours and hours of research, looking at photos and researching like washing machines and drying, you know, and dryers from the 1950s and 1960s.

Well, you vividly described them.

Good job.

Yeah, absolutely.

Excellent.

Excellent research.

Yeah.

So I'm curious, why did you choose to write this particular novel as a novel inverse?

And what are some of the challenges to writing a novel this way?

And obviously, what are some of the advantages?

Well, character dictated form in *Eyes Open*.

I chose Sonia as my narrator after the book that had Rosalia as my narrator.

It didn't work out.

But Sonia was a character in that book.

She was a secondary character.

And the big, you know, her big distinction in that book is she had started a poetry club and it was, you know, a lot of the students at their Catholic school were joining that poetry club and writing poetry in free verse to honor Sonia's boyfriend, Zé Miguel.

And to her, writing poetry in free verse is her way of carving out a bit of freedom in this repressive society.

And she already right at the beginning gets into a lot of trouble with the nuns for doing so.

Yes.

She compares, she said, well, Fernando Pessoa writes free verse and the nun says, Fernando Pessoa was a great poet.

You are a foolish girl.

Advantage form, this form reflects the narrator's personality and desire.

And I could let this joyful fiery and resilient character shape her story.

And so, yeah, I just let her, I just sort of felt like I became Sonia in that the challenge, the biggest challenge is I never written a first novel before.

Oh, really?

Oh, that was my first one.

And I just felt I had to write this in verse because that's who Sonia is.

So I had been a student at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

And one of my classmates, Cordelia Jensen, has written a number of first novels.

So I contacted her and asked her for advice.

And then I worked with Zetta Elliott on Moonwalking and learned so much more because Zetta Elliott is like an amazing poet.

And she taught me a lot, especially about concrete poetry.

Oh, yeah, which brings us to the next question.

So go on.

We were going to ask about the shape of the poems.

Yes.

And I had, you know, I put Eyes Open aside to write Moonwalking.

And when I went back to it, I felt like my first effort was like a first bad pancake, the one you have to throw out before all the other pancakes stick together.

So I started all over again.

And yes, the shape of the poem, I wrote them out in a notebook by hand so I could format them and see what they look like on the page.

Like with a prose novel, I'll just type it into the computer, but verse novels, I write them by hand.

And my erasers get a workout.

And the reason I did it that way, I really wanted the poems to reflect how Sonia visualized the words in her mind and specifically with the concrete poems that she lives on.

Her family lives like on the third or fourth floor of a walk up.

It's the third floor in Europe.

It's the fourth floor in the US.

And so she's going up and down those stairs.

And I have her thoughts as she's running up and down those stairs.

So there's specifically one poem where she is thinking about what she's going to say to her parents.

And you know, who could be at the door because it's a mystery who's at the downstairs door when she goes down.

And I do it as stair steps.

That's one that particularly sticks in my head for sure.

Yes.

And I don't want to say anything more because that poem would be a spoil.

I do think that that kind of concrete poetry really is great for young readers, you know, without even really knowing what they're getting out of it.

I think it just really adds so much to the emotion of a particular piece, you know, to read it that way.

So I really loved it.

Well, thank you.

The next question, I think you've touched on already.

So feel free to just have us skip this one, or if you want to add something, you can go ahead and do that.

But I loved Sonia's character, and I was wondering how you created it and how you decided how she would develop throughout the novel.

Well, I love the idea that Sonia would start a poetry club to honor her activist boyfriend.

And the leadership that she showed to grow that club into something that threatened the nun's authority as much as it did, she has the confidence and leadership skills that I could only dream of having.

And the way she speaks her mind and stands up for herself and what she believes inspires me.

Can a character inspire an author?

You bet.

Now, the novel depicts some harsh realities.

So I wanted to make sure Sonia's sense of humor came through as well to lighten things up, as well as to give her this disarming quality.

And the humor appears right away, right in the first poem when she admits that she was the one that started the rumor that the head of her school is so old that she knew the 15th century explorer Vasco da Gama personally.

Now, those in authority really try to beat Sonia down in the novel.

So there are places where she kind of loses that irreverence since the humor, but it comes back at unexpected moments in critical scenes, which I will not say.

Again, I won't say anything more about that because that would totally spoil the book.

Yes.

Oh, I agree.

But I loved how Sonia became like a role model for all of us that you can be an agitator.

You can be someone who gets out there for the good of the cause and also lose hope temporarily and then find it again.

I really loved that about the depth of her character.

The next question goes into the gentleman in her life, if you will.

Can you talk a little bit about how you chose Sonia's love interests and the follow-up is how much mixing between social classes was allowed in Portugal at this time?

Well, Zé Miguel was a major secondary character all along.

In the original prose novel, the one that will never see the light of day, his relationship with Sonia was a source of conflict for all the families involved.

I don't know.

He is one of my favorite characters of all time.

Definitely flawed, but brave, and always struggling to do the right thing.

I'm neurodivergent.

I was diagnosed as autistic, and Zé Miguel is also, he's the only character in this book who I would characterize as neurodivergent.

I don't know how much it comes off in this book as opposed to the other novel that will never see the light of day, but he would probably be diagnosed with ADHD these days.

Now, Emilio Emerge, as I wrote Eyes Open, is a counterpoint to Zé Miguel, the kind of guy Sonia would end up with in a rebound relationship.

As an artist, he has far more skill than Zé Miguel, which I think in his case may be as much privilege as talent.

And there's also the question of how much he cares about Sonia and how much he uses her for his own needs.

But I guess one could say the same about Sonia in that relationship.

As far as the mixing of social classes, Portugal under the dictatorship had a lot of the trappings of a feudal society with social relations basically out of the Middle Ages, highly stratified with property and power passed down from fathers to eldest sons.

Young men of the upper class were expected to sow their wild oats with lower class women, but marry within their class.

And the stigma against women marrying down was even greater.

So for the daughter of a restaurateur or small businessman like Sonia's family, to end up with the son of a manual laborer was more damaging to the family status than the opposite.

But in any case, I think Sonia's family was closer in status to Zé Miguel's family than to Emilio's.

Ultimately, Sonia's family and Zé Miguel's family shared the kind of precarious existence that Emilio's family never would because of their wealth and connections.

That makes sense.

Another character we loved was Zuleika or Zuleika?

Zuleika.

How did you choose to bring her into the story and make her an immigrant from Cabo Verde?

How did the Portuguese people tend to treat the immigrants from Cabo Verde and other colonies?

Migrants from the colonies as well as the countryside, when they came to Portugal, tended to end up in the harshest, most dangerous and lowest paid jobs and with women at the bottom of the scale.

As Sonia ended up in her punishment job, it was inevitable that among her coworkers would be migrants from Cabo Verde.

In the 1960s, most of the people who migrated to Portugal from the African colonies were from Cabo Verde because there had been a devastating drought on the archipelago.

Now, once the former colonies gained their independence in 1975, the year after the revolution, migration from both Cabo Verde and other countries in Africa increased.

And the dictatorship had an official policy.

It was called Lusotropicalism.

And it was a myth that the Portuguese were better colonizers because they were not racist.

They did not look down on people with darker skin.

And the dictatorship praised the closeness between Portugal and the colonies in order to justify its occupation and its exploitation of African peoples.

And that exploitation was just as cruel as the exploitation and colonization carried out by the French and carried out by the British.

Migrants were not treated well.

They occupied the bottom of the social and occupational ladder.

And in the neighborhood where Zuleika's family lived, the dictatorship, the police, they would send the police into those neighborhoods to destroy the homes of the people who lived there, claiming that it was a public health hazard.

So everyone was in a very precarious position.

And one of the reasons that Zuleika was working over time in this job was to be able to buy bricks so that her migrant family could build a brick house that would not be torn down.

Because if you had a brick house, it would not be torn down, but a house made of tin and a house made of wood would be torn down.

That was one of the interesting pieces of research that I found.

There are some scholars who have basically looked at the history of migration from Cabo Verde and other African countries to Portugal.

We were also wondering about how girls in Portugal would have seen girls in America at the time.

So through Mariana's letters to Sonia, you show some of the differences between them.

For example, girls in America had several more freedoms, while Portuguese girls had to pay for school, often had to leave school early to work, had difficulties dating or doing anything without a man's permission, and had to dress more conservatively.

Why did you decide to draw attention to these differences, and to what extent do you think Portuguese girls would have been aware of other girls' experiences at the time?

Well, Portugal is a country of about 10 million people.

During the dictatorship, 1.5 million people left Portugal for economic or political reasons or to avoid being drafted and sent to fight in Africa.

That's basically 15% of Portugal's population left the country because of the dictatorship.

And most went to France, but many ended up in the United States and Canada.

They sent letters to their families back home, and if they could afford to, they came back for visits.

So Portuguese living under the dictatorship did know about life in other places, a factor that in turn contributed to even more emigration from Portugal because they definitely saw that the grass was greener somewhere else.

Right.

Now drawing attention to the differences between Mariana's life in America, which is also a life of struggle, but with so many more opportunities.

And Sonia's back in Portugal also, for me, created this stark choice between leaving an oppressive country and staying to fight for freedom.

It's also the choice that faced my characters in Torch.

And finally, it highlights why people leave their homes and immigrate to countries that often don't want them, which is, of course, we see a huge issue today in both the United States and much of Europe.

People leave places where they have no opportunity, no freedom and no hope.

And they're attracted to places where there's freedom, safety and opportunity for a better life.

And generally, these immigrants are young, hardworking and ambitious.

Losing that 1.5 million people during the dictatorship was a huge loss for Portugal that reverberates today.

While those people and their descendants have contributed so much to the countries where they landed.

Yeah, I mean, immigration in general is a benefit for the receiving country and is a loss.

And I think also a tragedy for the country that loses people, that people are trying to leave.

Because it means that something, that that country really failed to meet the needs of its people.

Right.

And thank you for writing this book and for your part in bringing this to the attention of the readers.

Because even another, you know, the next question we have is about how in *Eyes Open*, you clearly show the importance of women's reputations and the threat of being ruined by getting pregnant before marriage.

And you've already alluded to, you know, how the wealthy class could play around with the lower class women, but they couldn't marry them.

So, you know, it was never going to end up being a positive outcome there.

But can you tell us more about what generally happened to Portuguese women who did have children out of wedlock during this regime?

Yes.

And there is, when you mention about playing around with lower class women, that, you know, these wealthy men got these women pregnant and the women had, and their child had to bear all of the consequences.

Right.

Now, some of them had children at home, especially in rural areas, there was really no access to hospitals, while others were sent to convents or other institutions to have the child.

Sometimes children were given up for adoption at birth, more ended up in orphanages because their mothers couldn't raise them or they were arrested for begging.

There was a notorious orphanage in Lisbon called Mitra that was closed because of the abuse of the children, but there was an expression in Portuguese at the time, which is basically saying go to hell.

That's what it meant because this orphanage for children of unwed mothers was just so abusive.

And these children grew up with stigma.

They were called illegitimate and denied educational and employment opportunities.

And this was one more example of how entire families and their descendants were punished for one mistake.

And the other option was forced marriage, in which in those days the man had all the power, including the right to take the child away from the mother.

So in a sort of another way that living under a dictatorship is shown in the novel is through the, even the people that Sonia is closest to, her sisters, her friends at school, they trust each other, but then someone always betrays someone else, or if they didn't, there's questions about who did or rumors about who did.

So to what extent do you think these experiences were the product of living under a dictatorship, or were there other reasons for this level of distrust and disloyalty?

Well, I think living under the dictatorship was one factor because the secret police, the government, encourages snitching, that this is how they get information and keep tabs on people as they get their neighbors to snitch on them.

There are also the lies that people are forced to believe or have to tell to survive, including people who are put under torture and will basically tell anything that the torturer wants just to make the pain stop.

But I think there is another really important factor, and that is the competition for male partners in a place where women had so little power.

In some ways, there's a closeness between women, a kind of bonding under oppression.

For instance, between Sonia and Zuleika, when they bond in the face of their harsh working conditions.

But Sonia also betrays Zuleika in the course of pursuing a boy who she believes will restore her to the status she lost when her family's restaurant was shut down.

So it's an example of competition for male partners.

There's no sisters before misters in this case because a woman could not be single.

She had to get married or she would basically have no life.

Now, what we see in *Eyes Open* is that people who are poor and powerless can form close ties and act in solidarity with each other, but they're just as likely to turn on a family member or a friend if they feel they can gain a personal benefit.

And those in power are very skilled at exploiting their subject's basic needs using the fulfillment of those needs or merely a promise to fulfill those needs, a promise that they maybe don't even intend to keep, to tear apart friendships and communities.

It's a strategy of divide and conquer, and it's something we see here in the United States, particularly in terms of race.

And the way that historically and today, for whites, racism is used to get poor whites to support the powerful.

Well, building on that a little bit, we noticed that a lot of the adults, like the nuns, Sonia's parents, the prison guards and the hotel owner, were usually the antagonists in your novel, while Sonia and other young people were the ones working for change.

What do you think we can learn from this?

From the example of the young people in your book.

Well, I think that, and I found this also in *Torch*, that young people, they have their lives ahead of them.

And for that reason, they have more of a stake in a repressive regime.

That it's their freedom and their opportunity that they don't have.

And that's going to be for the rest of their lives, unless they make a change.

What we can learn is that our young people also have so much more at stake, from climate change to reproductive rights, to the right to go to school without the threat of gun violence.

And that we need to fight for our futures, all of us, young people, old people, people in the middle, because otherwise the future that's handed to us isn't going to be the one we want.

And that includes, of course, the next election when democracy itself is on the ballot, along with things like climate change and the rights of women.

Beautifully said.

Absolutely.

I was also thinking with this next question about Amanda Gorman and her beautiful recitation of her poem at Biden's inauguration.

And so this next question, I know you're going to have a lot to say about it, but basically poetry clearly helped Sonia to find her voice and through the poetry club initially and then beyond to inspire others.

Do you think poetry can help young people to do that today too?

I definitely do.

And there's really a long history of activist poets.

If you look at a lot of different revolutions, there is a lot of poetry written around that revolution.

And it's one because it really captures the emotion of what's going on, but it's also because you can write a poem in the unexpected quiet moments.

And as when Sonia herself says at the beginning of the poem, Free Verse, when she says, I don't have time to rhyme because she's busy working and running off with her boyfriend, it's a different process from writing narrative prose.

I mean, narrative prose is butt and chair.

Poetry is something you do on the floor.

It really captures the heat of the moment.

And these turns of phrases and poems can be memorable.

I mean, they're lines that are running through your head as you're doing things, as you're acting and inspiring.

And that, for instance, I mean, Sonia is part of a tradition and is herself inspired by the poems of the Portuguese woman poet Sofia de Mello, Brainer Anderson.

And that's what she wants to be.

That's the life she wants to have.

But she also is aware of the fact that Sofia de Mello can write these poems and get away with them because she's part of the elite and Sonia is not.

Right.

Right.

That is true.

So much fascinating information.

I feel like I've had a whole history lesson.

So just to lighten things up a little bit here, we always like to ask writers that we interview just a little bit about your writing style.

Are you more of a plotter or a pantsier?

Well, I started out as a pantsier.

Yeah.

And I was when I wrote Rogue and then ended up having to cut about 80 pages of the manuscript.

I like to be surprised, but writing both Moonwalking and Torch turned me into a plotter.

Moonwalking because Zetta and I sold it on proposal and needed an outline.

Plus, an outline makes it a lot easier to write poems and slot them in.

I mean, you kind of need that structure, I think, with a verse novel.

And Torch, I had to plot out because of the complicated narrative structure.

It has four different points of view and three characters who become a collective protagonist with each of their actions determining the fate of the group as a whole.

So that really took a lot of planning out before I started writing that book or what I would do is write to a certain point and then stop and plot out what I would do next and who would be the character that narrated that scene.

Yeah, I feel like there's place for both.

You know, I teach creative writing and pantsing is great if you're just stuck because you don't have good ideas, which a lot of middle schoolers don't think their ideas are any good.

But some of them really want some structure in there.

So, you know, like whatever works for the moment.

I mean, the problem with plotting is if the story really is trying to go in another direction, it's important not to, like, fall in love with your plot, with your outline.

And still let yourself be surprised.

Because if you're not surprised, if you don't have that sense of wonder, your readers aren't either.

That makes sense.

Lyn, can you tell us what you're working on next?

Well, one of the other things I do besides write novels is translate.

And my next project, the one that's coming out, and we're still in final edits for it, coming out at the end of this summer, is a translation of a novel by an author from Angola, which is another African country that was, in fact, in 1961, the country where an uprising basically started the colonial wars.

And this, his name is Onjaki.

And he wrote this beautiful, it's an illustrated prose poem.

And the illustrations are stunning, too.

They were, Antonio Jorge González did the illustrations, but it's called Our Beautiful Darkness.

It's set in Luanda, the capital of Angola, in the late 1990s with the Civil War.

Following independence, there was a Civil War.

And it's the back, and that's the backdrop of a power outage where a teenage boy and girl are sitting in the patio of his grandmother's house, and all he wants to do is kiss her.

So it's this really sweet love story, but it's also a story about the power of language and story and creativity.

And so I'm translating that one, and then looking at possibly translating another illustrated prose poem by Onjaki.

And as far as my own projects, I'm sort of juggling.

I'm trying to decide between a middle grade historical novel that's set sports theme, early days of Title IX, and a YA contemporary.

And I should not be writing YA contemporary, but I'm thinking of giving this one a shot.

Yes, all of those sounds interesting.

The time seemed to dovetail with what you'd like to write about.

So, you know, I could see you giving it a go.

I really want to write a book about sports because I was terrible at sports, but I love sports.

Oh, that's awesome.

And that will give me a chance to create another aspirational character, assuming that that person is good at sports.

You know, much like for me, Sonia and the way she speaks out is kind of aspirational for me.

Right.

Right.

Well, and with the enormous popularity of women's college basketball these days and the whole big celebration of Title IX that, you know, we've talked about all year long, the timing is absolutely perfect for it.

No, I would agree.

Well, good luck with that.

Thank you.

So do you have any recommendations for our listeners for other novels in verse or other books about the time period that *Eyes Open* is set in?

Well, I would say for historical novels in verse, really one of my favorite authors is Kip Wilson.

The Most Dazzling Girl in Berlin, you mentioned before about the setting, and how did I evoke the setting through poetry?

Well, I had a wonderful mentor text in *The Most Dazzling Girl in Berlin* because she just so precisely and in so few words and with such evocative images recreates this world of the clubs of Weimar Germany.

And also her fictionalized biographies of Sophie Scholl in *White Rose* and Gerta Tarot in *One Last Shot*.

Now, I also recommend for books that explore young people living under totalitarian communism or post World War II fascist regimes, Ruta Sepetice, *I Must Betray You*, which is really all about how can you have a friendship when the government is putting pressure on everybody to snitch.

And one of the few books about a post World War II fascist regime in Europe is her novel *The Fountains of Silence*, set during Franco's dictatorship in Spain, which portrays, among other things, the role of the Catholic Church in stealing babies, first from leftist mothers and then, well, what we talked about, unwed and impoverished mothers and giving the babies to politically connected families or selling them abroad.

And this was, this is a recent scandal and it's the kind of untold story that Ruda has, you know, really become a master at telling.

And then it's not a YA novel, but Nobel Laureate José Saramago's *Raised from the Ground* is the saga of an impoverished rural family in Portugal that ends up on the wrong side of the regime after dispute between the workers and the landowners.

And it's one of the books that inspired *Eyes Open*, and it's a really good book, I think, for teens to read, you know, if they're looking for an adult novel.

Well, those are great.

Those all sound great.

Thank you.

All right.

Finally, can you please tell our listeners where they can find you online?

Probably the best place is my website, where I also, in addition to having information about my books, I have a blog that, among other things, gives advice on travelers to Portugal.

Oh, great.

That's great.

In fact, that's probably about 60 percent of my blog readers are looking to find out if they should rent a car in Portugal, or where they should eat, or where they should go.

I hear it's a good place to retire.

Well, yeah, that's the subject of one of my recent posts that's gone viral.

They canceled one of their visa programs for retirees.

Yeah, so I'm going to have a post probably within the next few weeks about other alternative visa programs for people, because there seem to be a lot of people looking into possibly moving to Portugal.

And, you know, on the one hand, you know, it really is a good place to move to.

But on the other hand, as I say in one of my recent posts, I think it is the most recent post, which also talks about Eyes Open, is that the freedom in Portugal right now was made possible by a lot of sacrifice.

People fought for this.

People were hurt.

People were imprisoned.

They were tortured.

People died for their freedom.

And, you know, it just sort of feels a little strange to think, well, we're going to go to a place that has freedom when people paid a heavy price for that freedom.

Yeah.

And I hope we don't have to pay that kind of price, because right now, all we have to do is vote.

Right.

But if we make the wrong decision, the price is going to be extraordinarily high.

It is.

It absolutely is.

And we saw a preview of what happens when a dictatorial type leader does not wish to leave office and accept what the voters have said.

Right.

And, you know, our capital was desecrated and people died.

Yes, they did.

As a result of it.

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

This has been such a pleasure and we've learned so much from you.

Well, thank you very much for having me.

This really has been a pleasure and I've really enjoyed talking with you.

Those are just such great questions.

Oh, good.

I'm so glad.

Thank you.

We love talking with Lyn Miller-Lachmann.

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

If you're interested in hearing some of the Fado music that is so integral to the book, we have included a recording from the Library of Congress.

The song is called Triste Fado, and it was recorded in 1939 in Oakland, California, as part of the field recordings from the collection of Sidney Robertson Cowell.

The artists' names are Alice Lemos Avila, Frank Huna and Joaquin Flores.

So stay tuned to After the Credits if you'd like to hear it.

We will put a link to the Library of Congress site in our show notes.

If you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook at Rogue Librarians Pod.

If you're enjoying this podcast, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you find your podcasts and please leave us a rating and review.

Your ratings and reviews are what help other people to find us and we want to be found.

As always, we are so grateful to our patrons.

If you would also like to support us, please join our Patreon at patreon.com/roguelibrarians.

As a patron, you receive bonus audio content and we give you personalized book recommendations and other great perks.

Finally, thank you to Chris for creating the music, to Heather and Lizzie for their assistance and to Dorothy.

Thanks, Dorothy, for editing this episode.

We appreciate you and to our patrons, thank you for your financial support.

We couldn't have done this podcast without any of them.

And finally, thanks to all of you for reading with us because books are meant to be read.