

Interview with Hala Alyan

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Hala Alyan about her latest novel, *THE ARSONISTS' CITY*, which is out now from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. You can find a complete transcript of this episode on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:38] **Kendra** So I am so thrilled to be able to talk to Hala Alyan today because I love *SALT HOUSES*, which was her debut novel, which focused on a Palestinian American family. Her latest novel, *THE ARSONISTS' CITY*, focuses on a Lebanese Syrian family. And the couple, Idris and Mazna, have moved to America, to California in particular. And they have made a home for themselves. They've had three children there. But really, it's a very complicated family. And I loved reading about this family's dynamics. This novel is over 400 pages, but I flew through it and read most of it in a single day because I loved these characters so much. And when I was chatting with her, I just wanted to ask her so many questions about what the characters were doing outside of the novel. But, you know, I had to restrain myself and just keep it to what was in the text. But I just felt so connected with the characters. And that really just goes to show Alyan's talent for creating this world and this family that I love reading about. Now, as you all know, I'm a huge fan of multigenerational family sagas. And so this book was in the center of my wheelhouse. And I loved learning about this family.

[00:02:02] **Kendra** At the beginning of the novel, the family is going to go back to Lebanon, to Beirut, to go to this family's house. Now, the patriarch of the family, Idris, has decided he wants to sell the house. And so Mazna, the matriarch, is very unhappy about this and kind of rallies the troops and calls her children to go back to Beirut with her and their father and kind of try to stop him from selling this house. That's really where the novel starts. And so we have this present timeline where this family is in Beirut. And they are fighting the father and not wanting him to sell the house. And there's all sorts of dynamics that are happening as well. And then we have flashbacks about Mazna's life, in particular. She is the matriarch. And we go back in time to when she met Idris and their story of how they came to be married. And there's just so many secrets in this family that are slowly revealed over time. There's such a skill shown here in this novel of when to flashback and what secrets to reveal and whose perspectives in the family that we are viewing the story from and how a singular event can be interpreted differently depending on whose eyes we're kind of viewing it through. And that's something I love about family novels. This novel reminded me of some of my favorite multigenerational family novels like *PACHINKO* and *A PLACE FOR US*. And I could fangirl about this book all day, but I will spare you.

[00:03:42] **Kendra** So before we jump into our conversation, here's a little bit about Hala Alyan. She is the author of the novel *SALT HOUSES*, as well as *THE ARSONISTS' CITY*, which we're talking about today. And she is also the author of four award-winning poetry collections, most recently *THE TWENTY-NINTH YEAR*. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, the *Academy of American Poets*, *LitHub*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Guernica*. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, where she works as a clinical psychologist. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Hala Alyan.

[00:04:28] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the podcast, Hala. I'm so excited to finally be able to talk to you about your work.

[00:04:34] **Hala** Me too. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:04:35] **Kendra** I really enjoyed SALT HOUSES, your debut novel. And so as soon as I saw you had another one coming out, it went on my immediate try-to-get-on-the-podcast list.

[00:04:45] **Hala** Oh, thank you. I appreciate that.

[00:04:48] **Kendra** So very thrilled to talk to you today. But yeah, I just . . . I guess as we get started, how have you been doing with everything? I know. . . . Well, I'm sure releasing a book during a pandemic is quite tricky, particularly since the last year of edits and everything have been through the pandemic.

[00:05:06] **Hala** Yeah, it's definitely been different. I mean, I think . . . I'm very grateful that I am going into it with having had one book that was a physical tour so that I already sort of—I don't know—so that I feel like I've had both experiences so far. There have been elements of this that have been really lovely, I have to say, which is that—not least of all—the fact that events being remote mean that people can join. I have a lot of loved ones and friends across the world. And so when I did the US tour for SALT HOUSES, it was amazing. But it does mean that, like, if you're having a talk in Seattle, it's only the people in Seattle that can come to that talk. Right? So whereas doing launches and doing events, I've been able to have people tune in from Beirut or tune in from London or tune in from Paris or. . . . So that's actually been one of the nice things about it. That's pretty much the only thing. Other than that, it's been . . . you know, I mean, I really . . . I really miss sitting in a room with a person.

[00:06:04] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah, it's definitely something that I think, oh, maybe in the future you could have live events that were also online.

[00:06:12] **Hala** Right. Right.

[00:06:13] **Kendra** I'm very excited for your events for your novel, THE ARSONISTS' CITY, which we'll be talking about today. But you actually, I believe, started as a poet, is that right?

[00:06:23] **Hala** I did, yeah. I mean, I started. . . . I guess it's kind of misleading. I've written both . . . I've written both genres my whole life, for as long as I've been writing. But I published first in poetry, so I felt like I was more established in poetry earlier on. So my first three collections. . . ? I think three collections of poetry came out before the first novel did.

[00:06:45] **Kendra** But there's something about someone who also writes poetry when they go to prose that I think is just wonderful because there's a more of attention to sound of the actual prose read out loud. And since I listened to the audiobook, I could definitely tell, as the narrator was reading it, that it just read beautifully out loud, which is something that I really loved about the story. And so I always love it when people can do both.

[00:07:11] **Hala** I so appreciate that. And I think that is something that has like. . . . You know how your practice in a certain part of your life just seeps into other parts without even fully being conscious of it. Like, I do think that there is an attention to musicality and lyricism and pacing that I . . . that kind of got hammered into me as someone that read a lot of poetry and did a lot of poetry and also performed a lot of poetry—like, you know,

doing open mics and spoken word—that I think has trickled its way into my fiction for sure. So I really appreciate that.

[00:07:41] **Kendra** Yeah. And I remember thinking about this when I read your debut, SALT HOUSES. And we have a Q&A with you that I'll link down in the show notes for our listeners.

[00:07:50] **Hala** Yeah.

[00:07:51] **Kendra** I love that book. Sumaiyya, in particular, was a huge fan and was like, "Kendra, you have to talk to her."

[00:07:59] **Hala** Oh my god, I love that. Thank you.

[00:08:02] **Kendra** Yes. So I'm very, very excited that your second book is out. And it is, I believe, 443 pages long. So it's quite hefty, which I found delightful. So you had a family story with SALT HOUSES, and now you have another family story. What did you find particularly challenging about THE ARSONISTS' CITY that you hadn't with your previous novel?

[00:08:28] **Hala** You know, I think . . . I think there was actually a lot about THE ARSONISTS' CITY that was easier in terms of writing. I think that once you've written one novel, it's not that all of what you write afterwards opens its doors to you easily. No, you're still frustrated. And there are times where you're like, "I hate this project. I can't do this." It's more that you at least have the faith that you've done it once before, which when you're first starting up a project for the first time ever, you don't have that. You don't have that net to catch you. You know what I mean? Or that sort of history to lean back on. So I think in that way it was easier.

[00:09:03] **Hala** What was particularly challenging with THE ARSONISTS' CITY was trying to write about a part of the world that has a particularly nuanced, complicated, complex history, namely Beirut and Lebanon—and frankly, the relationship between Lebanon and Syria. So it was. . . . A lot of it was kind of like the historical context, talking about the civil war, getting a lot of those political details ironed out, thinking about how different characters would interpret different things that happen because—as with most civil wars—depending on what neighborhood you lived in or what political faction you supported or what religion you were—because this was sectarian violence—you would have a different reaction to it. So having to think about how each character would take in and process each event was particularly complicated. And that was different than SALT HOUSES. In SALT HOUSES, the family was Palestinian. And obviously everyone had a relationship to Palestinianism that was different. But there wasn't the same kind of having to consider multiple perspectives.

[00:10:06] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah. That seemed a very ambitious part of the novel that I really enjoyed as the story unfolded. And you don't give the reader all of the information at once. You kind of just pick up snippets of it as you read through the book, which I think works really well as someone who is very unknowledgeable about that time period that you covered, particularly in the late 1970s. But this novel has so many amazing characters. I fell in love with just almost each and every one of them in different ways. And I just was captivated by them. And I mentioned before we started recording that I actually read this book in almost a single day.

[00:10:50] **Hala** I know! Which is not, I mean, that's not nothing. It's a pretty big book.

[00:10:55] **Kendra** Yeah, I think the last time I did that was with PACHINKO, which is a similar length.

[00:11:02] **Hala** Also, I was going to say, also a hefty book. A beautiful book.

[00:11:06] **Kendra** And, you know, there's a lot—I love family stories, as you may have gathered. And there's so many . . . such distinct viewpoints in this book. Did you have a particular character that came first to you that kind of started the story? Or was it just something that you picked up snippets and began to like, you know, put together in a single story?

[00:11:27] **Hala** Right, right, right. Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, so for me, the character that ended up being the pillar of the story—at least from my perspective—is Mazna, who's the mother, the matriarch, who's the woman in the coming of age in the '60s and '70s in Damascus, who's an actor who wants to move to Hollywood. And I had a dream around the time that SALT HOUSES was getting wrapped up, like a really vivid dream about this woman in Damascus who wanted to be an actor, wanted to move to Hollywood. And it was this weird dream where I was like both the woman, and I was watching the woman—and then, like, kind of watching her life like it was a movie, and she moves to California and gets really disappointed and resentful. And her dreams don't pan out. And woke up and was like, what? I don't even know what that is. And wrote it all down.

[00:12:09] **Hala** And as the next, I would say, a year and a half before I sat down to work on another like longer projects passed, I would just think about her often and be like, "Maybe I should turn it into a short story." And then when the time came to actually work on the book or to take on a new project essentially, I was having a conversation with my editor, with my brother, with a number of people that I really trust in terms of my writing and saying, you know, this is one idea that I'm interested in. But also I have these stories that I had been working on about the ex-pat culture in Beirut, which is a really interesting, very . . . like a very particular subculture in that city that I got to know pretty well while I was doing my university years there at the American University, my undergrad. And I got the suggestion of, like, maybe there's a way to marry these two narratives and then started thinking, well, what if Mazna was the mother? What if at some point one of her children went back to Beirut in modern day? And it kind of just snowballed from there.

[00:13:07] **Kendra** Oh, wow. I didn't realize that you went to school at the American University there.

[00:13:13] **Hala** Yeah, I did. I actually lived in Lebanon for eight years, and four of them were during my undergrad.

[00:13:18] **Kendra** So was that some of the inspiration of setting it there and tying the two narratives together?

[00:13:24] **Hala** Totally, yeah. I mean, I definitely think that for me, Beirut I consider to be one of my homes in a lot of ways and feel incredibly connected to it and had just a really life-transforming. . . . I mean, I guess everyone's undergrad years for folks that do it is transformative in some way. That age tends to be transformative. But having my university years happen in Beirut at a time when, like my freshman year, the prime minister got assassinated. The summer between sophomore and junior year was the July 2006 war

with Israel. And then my final year, there was like a Hezbollah takeover of the neighborhood that I lived in. It was just. . . . There was a lot going on during those four years. So coming of age with that as the background was really intense.

[00:14:09] **Kendra** I was just thinking about the end of the book when, like, you kind of give like a little, I don't know, insight into the future . . . Mazna's future with her kids.

[00:14:17] **Hala** Yes.

[00:14:18] **Kendra** And I was like, oh, okay. Like, it all clicks together.

[00:14:22] **Hala** I mean, essentially, this is. . . . You're bringing up something that was actually really challenging in the writing of it, which is that I had decided while I was writing that I was going to have the summer, present-day summer, be in 2019 in Lebanon. But I decided that before 2019 summer was over because you know how you have to plan for like editing. And then it turned out the book got pushed because of the COVID regardless. But you know what I'm saying. So like I was like, I am handing it in. And then I realized, oh my god, there was a fawdaa that happened very soon after, meaning a revolution took place very soon afterwards. And I referenced the future, like the few months after the summer in the book. So I had. . . . There were a number of times that I had to be like, "I'm so sorry, I need to do more edits. I'm so sorry to do more edits" as life just unfolded. You know what I mean? As history happened, I was like, people would be like, "Why did she not address this?" And so at some point, there had to be some stepping in, and folks being like, "Look, we're so sorry. You got to stop at some point." Like, we can't just keep writing the history, you know, as it's happening. But it was. It was really. . . . It was a lot like to be writing something that was kind of happening live and trying to find a way to nod to that in the stories. Oh.

[00:15:36] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. And there are a number of events that definitely impact the family's life that you have included in the story. And one of the things that I found particularly fascinating was how you put, you know, Mazna's story against this backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War. Could you talk a little bit more about how you worked through that process and thought about how you would have these three characters—there are two men in Mazna's life—and how they all interact together against this backdrop. And kind of. . . . I guess basically I'm thinking, how on earth do you tackle something like that in a novel? It just seems very intimidating. But I felt that you did it really well throughout the story.

[00:16:23] **Hala** Thank you for saying that. I mean, it was intimidating. It continues to be intimidating. It was a lot. I mean, I really wanted to create something that felt like it was true to the history of what happened. So that not just those of us that were not born when the civil war started could read it and be like, "Well, that seems about true," but also so that folks that really had not . . . had lived there, you know, the people that had been in Beirut in the '70s during the war could say, "Yes, this feels true to form." So that felt really important.

[00:16:55] **Hala** And then using the characters, I mean, it's hard to know, like. . . . In some ways, I've been asked the question of like, you know, did you use the characters to tell the story of politics? Or did you use the politics to tell the story of the characters and their lives? And it's like . . . it's kind of irretrievably linked, like there's no way to really separate it, in my opinion. Like, I think these characters simply would not be who they were if the history hadn't played out that way. So there's no way to tell the story without taking into

account the history. To speak of a woman in Damascus in the '70s and men in Beirut in the '70s is to speak of the war after '75. There's no way to not include that. And vice versa. I mean, to tell the story of these particular people in this particular time, like there was just this kind of unavoidable. They felt incredibly linked to me.

[00:17:41] **Kendra** It makes for very impactful moments throughout the book because you see how the war impacted these characters and how it irrevocably changed their lives and in so many different ways, not just in the way that you see in the obvious storyline that we have in the novel. But in all these smaller ways that come to light later in the story. And you're like, oh, okay. And you can go back in the book and think, "Okay, this is how these connect together" after the fact, which I think is pretty fabulous. Was it difficult to try to figure out how the structure would work throughout the novel so that we could kind of do that as readers to go back and see where that connected?

[00:18:22] **Hala** So the first . . . that prologue is actually the first thing I wrote. So I knew that that was going to come first. And I wanted us to then take a big jump back in time because I've always been a fan of movies or shows or books where you start with something that's really intense and then suddenly you either go way back in time or way in the future. And you're like, wait, what happened to that thing? Because I wanted by the time we returned to that character who—I don't think it's a spoiler because literally the first sentence of the book is, "Today, the man will die"—so a character dies in the prologue in the late '70s in Beirut. And then we jump to Park Slope and this woman kind of having like, you know, it's like modern day, like this present-day woman having sex with her husband in Park Slope. And you're like, "What is happening here? I need answers." And I wanted that sort of like dissonance and that kind of like confusion because what I really wanted was for the reader to have forgotten, in some ways, the original character by the time we go back in time. You know, to really only piece it together as they're reading throughout. Like, you know, as you're like three hundred pages in, and then you're like, "Wait, oh, that's right." Like, I wanted people to finish the book and be able to go back to the prologue and have it all fall into place.

[00:19:32] **Hala** So to your question of structuring, it was difficult. But I learned a lot from writing SALT HOUSES. And one of the things I learned was the power of an outline, which I did not have for SALT HOUSES. And I really suffered because of that in terms of the editing process. So having an outline for this one and having kind of correcting my—maybe overcorrecting a little bit—but correcting my practice a bit and really from the beginning sitting down and mapping out . . . not details, not like what's going to happen in each character's narrative arc . . . but at the very least, where characters would be at what point in time because there's a bunch of different locations. And I wanted to always have eyes on . . . "In 1991, this is where this character is. This is where that character is." Like to have at least somewhat of a frame for everybody. And that really helped when it came time to just sitting and writing.

[00:20:22] **Kendra** And that's something I loved about the book because I could tell you knew way more about these characters than you were sharing. And you share a lot. They're incredibly well rounded. How did you decide what parts of their lives to highlight for the story's sake versus kind of what you knew about them that you left on the cutting room floor?

[00:20:41] **Hala** That's such a beautiful question. I mean, so I write really long books. Obviously. So what ends up in your hands, there's already been a fair amount that's been cut. So actually I've written a lot of it. So it's not so much that I . . . I appreciate you saying,

like, you know, "you seem to know your characters well." That is sort of every writer's dream. Right? And I do think I know this family well. And I . . . but it wasn't just information that I was holding on, like, in my mind as I was writing. I frankly wrote it all out. And then in the editing process, as happens with everything I write, it was a first draft that was way too long and had to be edited and cut. So. So at that point, you're cutting from a first draft. You've already, at least in my case, I've finished the book. I have a first draft of the book, and I go back and cut. So at that point, I not only know the characters really well, I know what's going to happen. The story's essentially been written. And I . . . My editing is. . . . Some people's editing is they have to add or flesh things out. It's rarely that for me. It's usually trimming. So at that point, I have a pretty strong kind of overarching view of what's going on in the story. So it kind of makes it easier to know what are the elemental parts that need to stay and what can be taken out.

[00:21:49] **Kendra** That's incredible. I almost like want a . . . You know how on DVDs that they would have like bonus features where you could. . . . That's kind of. . . .

[00:22:02] **Hala** Yes! Yes. I've always wanted that for books too. Well, I mean, you'll love this, Kendra. For SALT HOUSES, I had literally like seven chapters that got cut, seven sections. So. And I have just been like, I've got to turn these in like short stories, I guess, and just kind of change details because there's so much that's written, and it's done.

[00:22:22] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:22:22] **Hala** Yeah. I've got to figure out a way to recycle it.

[00:22:25] **Kendra** I mean, you could do like, I don't know, special Barnes and Noble editions where they have like extra epilogues, you know.

[00:22:31] **Hala** Right? Maybe!

[00:22:33] **Kendra** Always, always here for that. But yeah, I really found all of your characters incredibly fascinating. And one of my favorite things that an author can do in a story is you have multiple perspectives on the same event, so you get all these different ideas. So I was thinking in particular with Naj and her older brother Mimi, they both love music. And Naj is incredibly talented. And Mimi is just, like, okay but very persistent. And I love being able to see both of their perspectives on their relationship for the characters and their different perspectives on events. How was the process like deciding who would be the one to tell a certain part of the story? And how did you decide what ones to return to? To give a different perspective on?

[00:23:21] **Hala** I was talking about this a little bit ago, like I wasn't going to have Naj. . . . So there's a character that's queer and a musician and lives in Beirut. And she's the youngest daughter. She's twenty-nine. And she sort of has this philandering lifestyle. And it's kind of like a rock star that's relatively successful living in Beirut. I wasn't going to have her come out to her siblings, which may be a spoiler. I don't know. Whatever. It is what it is. And that was something that felt like was not going to happen. But then as I was writing. . . . And this kind of goes to this idea of like, you know, characters do sort of get a life of their own when you're really in the flow, and they just start doing things that you hadn't planned or anticipated them doing—which, to someone who doesn't write, makes you sound a little bit like a lunatic. But it's true. Like you are kind of trying to manage this circus act where folks are just doing whatever they want at some point. And they're misbehaving. And you're like, "You're not supposed to fall in love with that person. What are you doing?"

Get back here." But there is a certain amount of like getting in the flow and just kind of letting the characters do what they need to do. And it felt by the time I got towards the end, it felt really important for her to do that.

[00:24:22] **Hala** It also felt really important. . . . I think the way that I assess who tells what part of a story is how central that story is to their development and how important . . . like who's . . . you know, I think in some ways, like, let's say an event happens in a family—a break-in, a fire, whatever, or even like a joyous one—it's not that any family member owns that event any less, but it's going to take up more space in some family members' lives. You know, it's going to be more of a defining characteristic for some people than for others, which is just kind of how life is. Right? You can have ten people experience the exact same thing, and you're going to get ten different stories and ten different interpretations and ten different, frankly, like weights, like differently weighed impact on them. And so that's very much how I think about it when I'm evaluating who should tell a shared narrative, which in a family, oftentimes a lot of these things are shared because they all grew up in the same house in this particular case. Right? So if Mom and Dad had a big fight, all three of them witnessed that big fight. Now, who makes the most sense to tell that story? Well, who was the one that ended up playing more of a central role? That's usually how I decide.

[00:25:32] **Kendra** That is incredibly fascinating. And I love being able to see that in your work and how all of these different characters just . . . they reveal different parts of the story in their own way. And it's just incredibly effective, depending on how you want your reader to feel and how you want to lead them almost emotionally in a certain direction because you know what's going to happen later down the road. And I really appreciate that. Particularly, you know, there's this moment when Ava's out with her two younger siblings, Mimi and Naj. And she looks at them. And she's like, "I don't know these people." And you as the reader, because you know the characters really well at this point, forget that the family members haven't lived together in a long time.

[00:26:18] **Hala** Right. Right, right, right, right.

[00:26:18] **Kendra** And like. Oh right! I, as the reader, kind of know these characters a little bit better than Ava does at this moment. What was that like for you, writing that kind of moment for Ava when she was realizing that for herself?

[00:26:32] **Hala** It was very jolting because I think . . . I mean, I think I also forget that they don't know everything about each other. You know, when you're so immersed in the lives of, in this case, five characters. Right? The three children and the two parents. And I guess the sixth character, the person that dies in the beginning. You're so immersed in those worlds that you do kind of assume that everybody knows everything about each other, but they don't. I remember. . . . It's interesting that you picked up on that scene because that was actually kind of a . . . it was a tough one to write because I think it was a really lonely moment for Ava and a moment where—I imagine as the reader, but certainly as the writer—what you want to say is, like, "You're not that alone. Like these. . . . Like just. . . . The three of you share so much more in common than you have differences if you would just, like, communicate and speak," which I think is kind of a true-to-form experience in a lot of families. Not everyone. But like a lot of families, a lot of sibling relationships, a lot of . . . even if we're not talking about family as a family, just like the caretakers we grew up, the people whose houses we share growing up, things like that . . . like, there is a shared history there that unfortunately people don't tap into as much as they should or could.

[00:27:35] **Kendra** It's really interesting to see that, as you know, I am the same age as Naj. I guess I'm a little older at this point. I really loved her perspective in particular because I was like, "Oh, I get this. Like, this clicks for me." But then I can jump into another character's head and see their perspective on Naj. And it got me thinking about my own family because I love family stories because I'm very close with my family. And we're very Appalachian, very like pro-family all the time. And so I was really related to the different dynamics of the family. And you can see that. And I think that's something universal about family stories, that we all have a family member or something like that or have chosen family or whatever. And we can connect with these kind of stories and relationships.

[00:28:24] **Hala** Yeah, absolutely. I think that's really beautifully said. I think what we mean by family varies, you know. And obviously, like, you know, this idea of like "talk about your shared history" doesn't apply as much in a family where there was abuse or there was certain kinds of trauma or violence. You know, I mean, there are . . . there are all sorts of configurations and structures where people feel close to people. And I guess that's like the idea of feeling a close kinship with someone is what I think of when I say "family." You know, and I think . . . because it is! I mean, there is a way that . . . I've noticed this even in having conversations with folks in interviews. Because I do . . . both novels have been family stories. And so there can. . . . It can feel, I think at first glance, exclusionary. Like it's sort of . . . we're just talking about like blood relatives. You grew up in the same house, traditional family structure, et cetera, et cetera. But I think the experiences that these three siblings go through, I mean, they're. . . . I have cousins that I feel like are as close to me as my siblings. And I have friends that I've grown up with that feel closer to as close, if not closer to a certain family members. Like I think there is a way in which what we're talking about—and I think this is sort of what you were saying resonated with me—it's like, what we're talking about at the end of the day is like just "kinship." You know, kinship in whatever form that takes.

[00:29:40] **Kendra** I think that's something that each of the three siblings are kind of trying to figure out on their own in their different ways. And that's one of the reasons why I really love the ending of the novel is because you leave them space to figure out their relationships. And there's that ambiguity there for them to figure out what kinship means to them and how they're going to move forward with the relationships in their life.

[00:30:03] **Hala** Yeah, I mean, I think it is. . . . I really. . . . I have a genuine period of grief when I'm done with my novels. And I can say this at this point because it's been more than one, in the first one, I was like, maybe that's just a thing that happened. But now it's been twice. And I'm like, I think this may just be a pattern where I get really, like, borderline depressed. And like just, I go through like a period of almost like vulnerability hangover. Or like, you know, like where I'm just like, oh, like where did they go? What are they going to do now? Like, I really genuinely miss them. And I . . . I feel their absence keenly. And I think that has a lot to do with the fact that I don't end the stories with everything neatly tied up because I am kind of trusting that the characters are going to figure it out. And so that does make it feel . . . there is a feeling of like they continue even for me as a writer, you know, because there is a way that I could end the stories and be like, "And then everything was this person did this, that person did that. And it's over." Like, and then I think I would feel a certain kind of like ending, capital-E ending. But it does feel open ended in a way that they almost feel like they continue existing.

[00:31:08] **Kendra** As a reader, I definitely feel that with family stories. Like I know how I think all of the characters' futures have. . . . Like I have very detailed ideas about what I

think these characters are doing after the book ends. And that's something that I enjoy as a reader because that's part of my participation in this story, is reading it and then having my own ideas, even if that's not, you know, initially what the author intended. It's fun to still imagine where these characters are because you spent so much time with them in reading their story.

[00:31:40] **Hala** Absolutely. No, I could not agree more. I think there is something really like. . . . It's like a breath of fresh air being able to, I don't know, like give that sort of freedom to yourself and to the reader to, like, insert their imagination as well because then it becomes kind of this cool collaborative thing where it's almost like you're writing it with them. They get to decide. You know what I mean? Like you also. . . . Like you're saying, you get to also decide what comes next.

[00:32:05] **Kendra** I love that. One of the things I really loved about the book is you had a lot of almost like history repeats itself moments. And as the characters are coming together for this memorial, for the grandfather. And one of the phrases that comes around a lot is "people deserve their secrets." And I became fascinated with this and almost began tracking every time it was used because it was talking about people's right to privacy. And there are a lot of secrets in this family. And that's kind of one of the joys of the book, is like, you know, the plot twists and are the characters going to figure it out? But can you talk a little bit about that phrase and kind of what it meant for you as you were writing this story, which is indeed full of many, many family secrets?

[00:32:56] **Hala** I mean, I think there was a real tension in writing where I. . . . So I do think people are entitled to their secrets, and I also think people are entitled to the truth. And that tension and, at times, contradiction is, I think, a big part of what makes up the story—that there are people that are keeping their secrets and protecting them because that's what they need and that's what matters to them and whatnot. But in doing that, they are taking . . . they are robbing other people of having access to the truth and oftentimes a truth that directly affects those people. So it does, I think for me, it's like . . . I don't even . . . I don't have . . . I don't have an answer. I don't have it figured out. Like, I think that it's. . . . I believe both dialectical and at times diametrically opposed things deeply at the same time. And I think that's made it really challenging. It made, to be honest with you, it made writing it pretty challenging.

[00:33:48] **Kendra** I love that about the book. There was that tension. I feel like Harper in a lot of ways—who's Mimi's girlfriend—she has these moments where she just is like a little Southern truth teller, which I appreciate. And she sits Mimi down one time. And she's like, "I want to know if it's going to change my life." And I really like that about her, about how she had that space for people to have their privacy and their secrets. And, you know, she was always like, "Ava, why are you trying to figure this stuff out about your parents?" And then she was like, "But if it's going to change my life, I want to know." And it's like she finds, for her, a balance between those two things.

[00:34:32] **Hala** Yeah, totally. I mean, I think that's exactly it. It's like it's finding a way to. . . . I mean, I think if you can find a way to express what matters, what is important for you. Like, if this is going to affect me directly. If this is going to . . . you know. But the tricky thing is, I think, especially between Ava and her mother . . . there are secrets there for Mazna to give those secrets up requires so much to be lost on her end. And so you have empathy—I hope you do; I mean, I have . . . I had empathy writing her—for why she would also deeply want to protect those secrets and why it would be really important for her not to

give them up. But then you also have empathy for the children and the husband, all these other people that are, I mean, are definitely affected by that.

[00:35:15] **Kendra** Yeah, I really love how you can take a family saga and make it your own and change things because even though you've written two family stories, they're very different. And they each have their own unique feel and kind of personality to them. I imagine it must be challenging because you never want to go into, like, authors writing the same story over and over. But these are very different stories, even though they deal with families, which I appreciate.

[00:35:42] **Hala** Yeah. I mean, I think that it's one of those—and to be completely honest with you—it's one of those things that, like I, I do think there was a little bit of fear of like, "I'm a one-hit wonder." Like, you know what I mean? Like, I told one story. And I'm just. . . . I'm only going to be able to tell that other story or some version of it. But when I started writing, I was like, oh, no, this is. . . . I mean, a lot of the stuff. . . . I think there's a lot here that is very similar to SALT HOUSES in terms of broad strokes, you know what I mean? Thematic. Like kind of like the elevator pitch. Like, intergenerational, displacement, family story. You get different general . . . like that feels very similar. But then when you kind of zone in and get more granular, it's a very, very, very different kind of story.

[00:36:23] **Kendra** It's like they're part of the same family, but their characters are very different personalities. Almost.

[00:36:28] **Hala** Exactly.

[00:36:29] **Kendra** Yeah. So before I let you go, I want to ask you. You've written two beautiful family stories. What are some of your favorite family stories that you read maybe recently or just want to share with our listeners?

[00:36:44] **Hala** That is such a good question. Okay, so I. . . . I really loved THE VANISHING HALF by Brit Bennett. Did you read it?

[00:36:52] **Kendra** I did. Yeah.

[00:36:54] **Hala** Ohh. So good. So it's . . . it is . . . it's funny that the fact that I hesitated about it being a family story is like, I think, high praise because it feels like it actually just follows one character. But then when you think about it, you're like, oh, what I'm thinking of is "the character" is like these seven different characters. Like that's how deeply . . . that's how deeply nuanced the look is and how much space and air and room each character is given to grow and evolve, both connected to other characters and also on their own. So in that sense, it kind of feels like a novel that has several different novels in it. But at the same time, there is a way in which they are so incredibly interlinked and so beautifully set up. Like each story is set up to tell the story of a different . . . of the generation that comes after. And like the characters are just, yeah, it's a delight.

[00:37:47] **Kendra** The last question I have for you is that you mentioned you have several events coming up. In addition to that, is there anything else that's on the horizon for you that you'd like to share with our listeners?

[00:37:59] **Hala** Oh, in terms of projects? Yeah! So I'm working on a. . . . So there's this novel that is basically centers around a woman who grew up in Savannah, an Arab woman, Arab American woman who grew up in Savannah, whose roommate, college

roommate gets murdered. And she kind of leaves Savannah, moves to Europe. And about a decade later, something happens to bring her back to her hometown. And she starts kind of digging around to figure out what happened to her friend. So very sharp left turn from the sort of stuff I've been writing. And then there's a nonfiction project that recently sold to a publisher that will be kind of like a cultural memoir exploration of the concept of erasure, both kind of on an external level and then the ways that we erase ourselves through things like eating disorders and codependency, substance abuse, all that.

[00:38:46] **Kendra** Oh wow. They both they both sound so fabulous. I mean, Savannah, Georgia?

[00:38:50] **Hala** Yeah!

[00:38:51] **Kendra** I live in between Charleston and Savannah.

[00:38:55] **Hala** Are you serious?

[00:38:56] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:38:56] **Hala** Oh my god. I'm going to. . . . Yeah, I'll hit you up for. . . . I mean, I actually went to Savannah. I brought my friend with me last . . . right before, I guess, pre-COVID. And we went for like a long weekend. And I was just like, I need to know what it's like. It's really fun.

[00:39:10] **Kendra** Yeah, it's gorgeous. I mean, I just moved here in the fall. And so, moving during a pandemic means that I have been very few places around. But it is very beautiful. There's so much Spanish moss everywhere.

[00:39:24] **Hala** Oh my god. It's haunting, isn't it? It's like gorgeous.

[00:39:28] **Kendra** It's literally dripping Old South. Like. That is. . . .

[00:39:31] **Hala** Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

[00:39:32] **Kendra** So I'm very excited to to read your future book now. I think it'll be really great. I'm always here for Southern lit, so.

[00:39:43] **Hala** Thank you so much. I really appreciate that.

[00:39:45] **Kendra** Well, thank you so much for chatting with me today. I'm so excited that we finally got to be able to chat and especially about this book, which is just so good. I'm still in a book hangover.

[00:39:55] **Hala** Thank you. I really appreciate that. I really appreciate this chat as well. This was wonderful.

[00:40:03] **Kendra** And that's our show. I'd like to thank Hala Alyan for talking with me about her novel, *THE ARSONISTS' CITY*, which is out now from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. You can find Hala Alyan on her website, halaalyan.com, and on Twitter (@halanalyan) and on Instagram (@hala.n.alyan). All of these things, of course, will be linked in our show notes. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester. Our music is

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