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>> Hello, I'm Cheryl Kennedy [phonetic] from the Library of Congress. The National Book Festival is in its seventh year, and it has attracted tens of thousands of book lovers of all ages to the nation's capitol to celebrate reading and lifelong literacy. This free event is sponsored and organized by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. This year the festival will take place on Saturday, September 29th on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Festival goers will meet and interact with 70 best selling authors, illustrators and poets. There will be activities for the entire family. If you're unable to attend in person we invite you to experience the festival online. Our podcast interview series with well known authors along with webcasts from the festival will be available through the National Book Festival's website at [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest).

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We now talk with Carmen Agra Deedy, one of many award winning authors who will appear in the Children Pavilion at the festival on September 29th. Carmen is an internationally known children's book author, storyteller, and radio contributor for National Public Radio. She was born in Havana, Cuba and immigrated to the United States with her family in 1963 during the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution. Carmen has received numerous awards for her best selling children's books. Her latest is a colorful version of a popular Cuban folktale, *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach*, A Cuban Folktale is being released in English and Spanish. Welcome, Carmen.

>> I'm glad to be here, Cheryl. Thank you.

>> Tell me, is there a special talent or understanding that an author needs to communicate with children?

>> I think that it's important to know a child's world, whether it is through your own vivid memories of childhood. I have this wellspring of recollections that comes from playing in the creek all day. When I was a child we went outside, and we didn't come in when the streetlights came on whenever the weather was warm enough which in the south is most of the year. And I remember playing vikings and playing sea hunt. Not watching it, playing it, making up games from the TV show you watched. Of course, the TV has [inaudible] channels and oddly two shows that you watched all week. So I think that it helps to have memories of your own to relate to. Most importantly in order to write I think for children and to tell stories to children you have to be willing to suspend disbelief just as they do. And that includes the myth that you are a grownup. I think it's really important to say when you're with them I'm eight years old, I'm ten years old, what do I like. And observing the world like a ten year old it's really amazing. They're like a portal to the universe. Everything is fascinating to a nine year old. I joke and say, oh God, the children are in the fourth grade because it's a marvelous age. And nothing, nothing to them is really completely unappealing. I mean they may not want to eat it like brussel sprouts, but they're going to be curious about it. And whether it's the viscosity of their own mucus which is so disgusting to an adult, to a grownup you know, but to a kid it's

just oh, yeah. To the Madagascar hissing cockroach, oh, can I have it for a pet? I mean there is almost nothing in their world that isn't endlessly interesting because it's still new. But they're just on the cusp of being old enough to grasp the world being bigger than themselves if that makes sense.

>> Oh, absolutely, that's fascinating. Now, tell me, you think the secret to longevity is just having the spirit of a child?

>> There's a difference between having a childlike sort of outlook or even a personality that refuses to grow up. We all have encountered those people. Most of those people are maddening and make a lot of us very tiresome. There's a difference being an adult who is functional, how pays her bills and shows up on time and does the work. But yes, the keys within them that sense of wonder about the world and the people in it. And the people that I love the most as artists, not only writers but also illustrators and composers are the ones that when you sit and talk to them, say at a waffle house, they'll be as fascinated about the conversation about their own work as will you look at what he's doing, look at the cook. And the cook is suddenly flipping pancakes or whatever. They don't miss it. I think being present is what keeps us young, not missing it. Very young children when you're six or seven don't look back on five. You probably wouldn't anyway because five is gone and seven has its own story to tell you. But right it's six and the moment six is gone or 46 it's not coming back again so don't miss it. And for us as older people it's the same thing. Don't look back on 27 whether it was wonderful or it was the year that basically annihilated you. It doesn't matter. It's gone. And heaven knows what we have tomorrow or next year but right this moment, this present moment. And sometimes I feel it so acutely. It can be the warmth of a coffee mug as my hand wraps around it. It could be the texture of some fabric like a shawl or even an old pair of jeans that I put on. And I love those moments because I do think, yes, maybe they provide a certain extension of one's youthfulness. But I think also it's the best part of being human, being here.

>> I'm sure that you would agree that creativity is the essence of any art form. Where do you get yours?

>> Oh, goodness. I mean no doubt the thought is when I've told stories or if anyone has read my books at some point they think, oh my goodness, how creative. Not really. I'm dogged. I will doggedly pursue an idea. And at first my prototypes of stories are so clumsy and unwieldy. I mean they're just usually just awful. And the creative part I think comes from, harking back to the last question, from observation, from constantly being aware of who I am and who's there and what things look like and how they smell. And if there's any creative part to story writing to me it's the crafting of the story. The initial idea, of course, which I think comes from youth in a grotto somewhere that sort of sparks something, something you hear, something you see, something you experience that touches a really deep cord. But then comes the love of crafting the story and working on the story. And I think for me creativity is something that you have to give to, you have to give back. I mean the gods give us that initial piece of inspiration and they expect us to do the work. And it is

work to craft a story. And you can get very creative by use of the [inaudible] what you've learned as you've walked through this world.

>> How much of what we read of Carmen Agra Deedy is influenced by her cultural background?

>> Mmm. I think, of course, the culture of birth, meaning culture of nationality, culture of family and culture of neighborhoods because it's all different culture of church or synagogue, I think they all inform us. They do influence who we are. But for me I think it's accurate to say that I'm very [inaudible] I suppose a strange dichotomy of a very Cuban person. I love the food, I love the music, I love the language, I love the picturesque sort of moments that you can have in Cuban Spanish. It's just so flavorful. And then I have equal parts at least of deep south where I spent 44 years of my life. I started [inaudible] an enclave sort of a Cuban community. It was very closed off. Not hermetically sealed but pretty closed off from the rest of the community, but eventually grew into -- took off [inaudible] of that community. First was school and then later through things I joined, civic things. I time I became truly -- ah, I can't think of the right word. Go figure. I grew to love the flavor of, again, the food, the music, the storytelling, the language. Southern English had a whole other cadence. It's real slow. And it isn't the same everywhere. That's more of a [inaudible] Tennessee not [inaudible]. Jack done come down the mountain. But then you go to say [inaudible] southern. Oh, lord, yes, I went to Agnes Scott. My sister went there, too. The kind of lady that keeps [inaudible] scotch in your bosom and flip it out and it was always warm. [Laughter] So all these facets to being southern. So I suppose I never -- when I'm asked about one side or the other they're no longer one. They've bled into one another. And I love both cultures. They're not always easy to bridge. But if I learned anything from my own experience is how alike we all are in so many ways. And you certainly [inaudible] from the Cuban culture and the southern culture [inaudible] not as many disparities that you think but there would be that many tells. But Cubans and southerners truly value family. The clan, the tribe is the first rung on the ladder of the world. And then they become [inaudible] your neighborhood and your church and then your community and your country and so forth. And the Cubans and southerners are both very literate. We love to read, we love stories. We love through food. You're hungry we feed you. You're not hungry we feed you. You're sad we feed you. You're mourning we feed you. You're happy we feed you. You're getting engaged we feed you. You just broke up with your fianc, we feed you, and mountains of food always. Love through food and festival worshipers, both cultures, whether it's in Spanish. Within moments of meeting something one Cuban will say to another [foreign language], the southern version of which is so, tell me darling, who are your people? Which really means who are you and who do you come from. And it doesn't have to be your people were [inaudible] of great families and so forth but they were your people and they matter. It's the culture that believed it. Who you came from made part of who you are. And for some of us that thought is absolutely heart stopping and terrifying.

>> I'm from the south so I certainly agree.

>> Then you know. Do you ever see like a southern film or a film that's hailed as a story of the true south, and you sit and you think who are these people? I don't know these people. Some Hollywood person's version that took some bizarre lens of caricatures of southerners. Southerners aren't just sweet tea and overhauls and civil rights and all those issues, there are serious ones, of course, they're critical. They are layers upon layers of subtleties. And to be a Black southerner and be a white southerner it's not the same thing. But they're not always at war with each other. Especially now, but even historically. My own family came in the middle of civil rights. And this was in the early 60s when being Latin was actually sort of being like an exotic hothouse flower or something. Now not so much. But here we were this little tiny Cuban community in this little southern town. Very progressive little southern town [inaudible]. But things were changing there. And the Cubans I knew wanted [inaudible] civil rights. Many of them marched and did what they could. But to the children in school it was just an awakening to something that was not part of -- for all the troubles that we had had as a country that wasn't a part of our life, that concept of separate but equal, that concept of the color of your skin is now defining you. Some of our first patriots were Spanish and Black and Creole. I do love that so much.

>> Now, your Cuban heritage is a dominant theme in your latest work. *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach, A Cuban Folktale*. I'll never look at a cockroach the same again.

>> I'm personally thrilled as is probably every entomologist in the country.

>> Okay, a reviewer said that your book was simply extraordinary. Would you share a few excerpts with us?

>> I'd love to. Here we go. Martina Josefina Catalina Cucaracha was a beautiful cockroach. She lived in a county street lamp in Old Havana with her big lovable family. Now that Martina was 21 days old she was ready to give her leg in marriage. The Cucaracha household was crawling with excitement. Every senora in the family had something to offer. The [inaudible] a sea shell comb. Mama gave her [inaudible] a lace shawl. But [inaudible], her Cuban grandmother, gave her Avwella [phonetic] some shocking advice. You want me to do what? Martina was aghast. You are a beautiful cockroach said Avwella. Finding hard ones to choose from will be easy. Picking the right one could be tricky. But what, stammered Martina, how [inaudible] how to find a good husband. Her grandmother smiled. It will make him angry then you will know how he would speak to you when he loses his temper. [Inaudible] said Martina, the coffee test she never fails. Martina wasn't so sure.

>> That's really very nice. What advice would you give parents to encourage reading a lifelong literacy?

>> Read. Read by example. Model reading. And if you're not a big reader yourself, and there are people who aren't, read with your children. If they're not going to see you reading spend time reading with them. And they're not too young, they're never too young to be read to. They have t

learn physically how to hold a book. They have to learn to turn pages. You could start this with a 12 month old child and younger. There are little hard books now wonderful, and they have been for a long time been available. The ones that even a teething baby can go at and pretty much not put a dent in. With my own girls reading was just such a part of home. And if a child grows up feeling that reading is pleasurable, that reading is comforting and safe. You're sitting on your parent's lap or next to someone who loves you while you unfold or unspool, that's such a great word, a story together and turn the pages. And they have a job. Their job could be to turn the page. Or a favorite book, that's always so wonderful. It's like a blankey. And on top of that, of course, is that eventually you will grow to loathe that book. If I had to read Goodnight Moon one more time at one point it was going to become an aerodynamic book and just go flying straight out one of the bedroom windows, but they loved it. And all of my daughters are readers, but the one that was more of a math child she nonetheless grew into her own kind of reading. And we allowed all kinds of reading. Comic books are reading. Graphic novels are reading. Sports Illustrated is reading.

>> Well, you've been a favorite at the National Book Festival in the past. Of course, you were there in 2002, 2003. What can fans expect to hear from you at the book festival on September 29th?

>> Well, I will be telling Martina the Beautiful Cockroach because this is the only book that was in the oral before it went to text. And other books I've worked on, this is my seventh book, that has not been the case at all. So this story has an oral version. What's fun about that is to hear a story told and then go to the text and see how it's different and do sort of a little comparative study even if it's just for fun with children. How was this different when she told it than when she read it? And do things happen when you tell it that don't happen in the book or vice versa? I'll be telling the story. And then I don't always do this, but I like doing at least a little bit of a humanities based program when it's possible. And the book festival is wonderful. They give us really tremendous largesse in that respect. So when I'm finished I'm going to open up for Q & A so that we can have some audience questions and participation.

>> Well, thank you, Carmen. As I said, I'll never look at a cockroach the same way again after reading your book.

>> Oh, I'm thrilled, and so is Martina.

>> Good. Well, thank you. We look forward to hearing more at the National Book Festival on Saturday, September 29th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a list of participating authors visit [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest). Thank you for listening.