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>> Matt Raymond: This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its seventh year, this free event held on the National Mall Saturday, September 29, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators, and poets. Even those not attending in person can access the event online. These pre-recorded interviews with well-known authors are available through the National Book Festival website in podcast format. To download, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest.

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We now have the honor of talking with famed children's author Patricia MacLachlan. Her critically acclaimed books include "Arthur, For the Very First Time," winner of the Golden Kite Award; and "Sarah, Plain and Tall," winner of the Newbery Medal and subject of a popular television movie series. Ms. MacLachlan is also the recipient of the National Humanities Medal. Her latest book "Edward's Eyes" hits bookstores on August 28. It's the story of a family and about coping with loss. We'd like to welcome you, Ms. MacLachlan. It's a pleasure to talk with you today.

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

>> Matt Raymond: Let me ask you first about your new book "Edward's Eyes." What can you tell us about this book?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, it was -- it takes me a long time to write a book, and this one took a very long time, and I think it's because of the subject matter. And it started 15 years ago; my son, who has lived in Africa for a long time, was in the backyard with me and I happened to see in his wallet that he was a donor, I saw that on his license. And I said, "You're a donor?" And he said, "Yeah. Somebody should have these great photographer eyes." So as a mother, you think, oh, horrors, but you're proud at the same time, and as a write, you being a story. So began that long though, only lately to be finished.

>> Now, in "Edward's Eyes" and in other works, including "Sarah, Plain and Tall," you have examined serious issues in ways that young people can relate to and understand. What is your approach to that? How do you think you go about accomplishing that? Well, you know, I think that good books that are children's books are -- can be enjoyed and read by adults as well as children. I think there's a many-leveled part to them, and they're should be. If you think about, oh, any of the great books, "Charlotte's Web," there's something you can get when you're five years old and it's read to you, and something you can get when you're 105 and you read it. So there's a certain quality. And I think I strive for that sometimes.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, you said in other interviews that sending children messages through writing is actually low on your priority list; that instead, you try to communicate in a way that the story brings children along. So even if you readers might not take away specific messages they certainly gain something. What do you think or hope your readers will gain from "Edward's Eyes"?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I hope they see themselves somewhere in this. I like this family, and I love Edward, and I love Jake, I love the children, and somehow, I created this family I loved, and then I had to deal them a terrible blow, and I think sometimes things happen, and children know that. We don't give children credit enough so that they can see themselves in there, they can see something that perhaps happened to them, or they can imagine it and it kind of enlarges their world and their imagination.

>> Matt Raymond: What do you think books can teach us about ourselves, particularly young people?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I think you can stretch children. Children can read books far beyond their years, and they can understand philosophies and they can understand language. Some child left a message on my machine and he said, "I love what you say, and I love what you don't say." [Inaudible] to me, that was just fabulous because there are some things you just don't say and you hope the child grasps, and this child obviously did.

>> Matt Raymond: If we could go back in time just a little bit, I'm sure your readers and fans would be interested in hearing about how you came about becoming an author, and why did you choose children's literature.

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I was a great reader, and I grew up in a family of readers, and my parents had books everywhere. And I think there's a message there for parents that if you read and you have books in the home, it's seen as valued. And my parents read to me all the time, and my father acted out books with me. He acted out "Peter Rabbit," sometimes I could get him to do it 25 times a day, and we would change roles and we'd discuss it and philosophize about it. So books became real, and I could find myself there. My father once said, "Read a book and find out who you are." And that's kind of my philosophy, so that when I started writing, I wanted to write for children because I think they're discerning, and adults can read them as well. So I feel like I have a large audience.

>> Matt Raymond: Are there any authors in particular who influenced you most as you were developing your craft and as you were growing up?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I read everything. I lived near a little library, and I would walk down there, and I read every single children's book in the entire library, and then I began them again. So I read all of "Little Women." In fact, last night I was up late and watched "Little Women" on television, which was kind of taking me back to my youth. And - - but I loved writers like Natalie Babbitt and Katherine Paterson, William Steig. Somehow reading these books inspires you and it makes you

want to write better. And I think that does the same for children. When children begin writing, I think they begin by imitating, and so they pick their models, and I do the same.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, speaking from the Library of Congress, we certainly appreciate your promotion of libraries and the fact that you visit your libraries. How do you find today that you continue to get inspiration and motivation in your writing?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I still read, and I belong to a writer's group and we meet once a week and we discuss our books and our stories and critique them. And when I go to libraries and talk to children, or to schools, I take my many, many drafts of my stories to show them that I have a library very much like theirs; I have to do things over and over again. They're astonished because I think many children feel that writers do it because they get it right the first time. And so it's inspiring to them, I think, to see that I work at it. And "Sarah, Plain and Tall," for instance, took me five or six drafts to get right, and then you write it over again when you find an editor, and then, of course, when you do the movie, you write it yet again. I feel like I could write that from book from the cat's point of view by now.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, you mentioned earlier a call that you received from a fan in which a person said they love what you say and what you don't say. How does feedback from your young readers motivate you and inspire you?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Oh, it's fabulous. I even love the letters when they say, "I haven't found a book of yours that I like yet, but when I do, I'll let you know." I even like that. I like the honesty of children. And one little girl wrote me and said, "Are you married? I'm not. Tell me, how is it?" They think they know a lot more than I do. So I don't know. There's something refreshing about that. They're an unfettered and uncynical audience I think.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, you said that your writing process can be long and maybe deliberate. Do you find that you encounter difficulties as you're developing stories? And how do you overcome those? What is your process?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Yes, I sure do find difficulties. I begin a story usually with a character, I have a character in mind, as "Edward's Eyes" began with my son, actually, who still lives in Africa. And I just began. And I began -- as I began, I'm beginning to know the character. And I go through Chapter 1 and I think, well, who is this and what's going to happen. So I write for the same reason I read: To find out what's going to happen. Sometimes I know the ending but I have no idea how I'm going to get there. So it really is a winnowing out process. Boy, my delete button on my computer is really overworked.

>> Matt Raymond: Do you have any advice for aspiring writers, people who aspire to do what you do perhaps?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Sure. I think they have to be readers, and I think they have to respect children if they're writing for children, and

figure the children are smarter than they think, and never talk down to them or condescend. But I think being a reader is the main thing. And I still go to the library every other day and take out books, and I now have grandchildren, so I get to read new books with them, sometimes classics that I read when I was a child.

>> Matt Raymond: Do you find that there any special challenges or issues the writing for children? I mean, obviously, you don't talk down to them. But are there issues perhaps that would be different if you were writing for an adult audience?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Yeah, I think what happens is what you do when you write for children is, you don't have the complexity of language that you do when you write for an adult. And I think what you do is communicate the essence of an experience without using a lot of language, and I think that's the challenge for writing for children.

>> Matt Raymond: Do you think sometimes adult authors maybe lose touch with their own childhoods a little bit?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: I think a lot of them do, and I think, actually, a lot of adults when they begin writing for children, think they remember childhood, or as they think they know it, but they really don't remember it well. I had this very intimate connection with my childhood. I remember when I was three and four and where I lived and what I did and how the hollyhocks smelled in our yard. And I just have this amazing remembrance of how it was to feel lonely and worried and all those kinds of things that children go through -- and they love hearing this. They love hearing that I haven't quite grown up yet.

>> Matt Raymond: Why do you think your memories are so vivid? I think a lot of people find their childhood's just sort of a hazy blur or maybe just very nebulous.

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Yeah. I don't know. I think -- I had a fabulous family, and we had fabulous -- we traveled, and my father and mother always talked to me about things, and I was -- you know, I had imaginary friends. I was an only child and I had imaginary friends who my parents set places at the table for because my father, who was a philosopher, thought that having dialogues with them was wonderful for me. And I think that's where I learned how to do dialogue. And I think that's why I can write screenplays because I always have conversations. I have conversations still in the car with my characters as I'm [inaudible] but nobody knows it. They think I'm singing to the radio.

>> Matt Raymond: What are some of the differences in writing screenplays? And, obviously, with your work having been adapted for the screen, how do you find that translates? Does it translate easily?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, Glenn Close once told me that my stories of Sarah did, because they were so spare, there was life between the lines. And in -- when you read them, you know the adults are having a life right next to the children even though I don't necessarily write about. So when I wrote the screenplays, I could bring in the adult lives as well. So I

think that that's part of it. And also part of it is being a parent. You know when you're parent, as I do, you have to let go of your children sooner or later, and I do that as a writer. So when I write a screenplay, sometimes there are things that I don't like as well as in my book. But you know, the book is there and so I let go and try it a different way.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, you've written for the screen, you've written young people's literature. Are there any other genres that you have an interest in that you would maybe tackle?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: No. You know, I always wanted to be a poet, and the only way I can satisfy that is to write picture books. I dearly love picture books, and I think the good ones are like little poems that you can hold in your hand. And my daughter and I are writing them together. We just have new one coming out called, "Fiona Loves the Night," about a child who goes out in the night in the meadow, because my daughter loves the night. So somehow that satisfies my craving to write a poem.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, your writing has netted you some of the most significant awards that writers can get. What does that mean to you? Is there a particular importance in being awarded for your writing?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, sure. You know, when you get an award that is voted by your peers or by librarians, it pleases you, it makes you feel good that these are the people who value your work and bring the books to children, so you like them. But I'll tell you, the biggest reward is sometimes getting through a paragraph and getting through a sentence and getting it right.

>> Matt Raymond: Now, we're very pleased that you're coming to the National Book Festival September 29. Why do you think it's important to participate in the Book Festival?

>> Well, I think it brings the values to the whole world, and I think it's a fabulous thing. I've attended before and the audiences are wonderful and appreciative. And, you know, Laura Bush, being a librarian, values books. And I think it's wonderful she brings this to the rest of the world.

>> Matt Raymond: Do you have opportunities for a lot of direct interaction with your readers?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Yeah. I go to schools and talk with kids, and, you know, almost every time I go, I learn something. They have an observation about a book or something that I never thought of. For instance, the other day I went to a school and they told me that they wondered if one of my characters in one of my books was related to the one in the other, because I had the last same name. And I they never even knew that. And that's just so pleasing to know that children read with that eye and that ear so that they can point out things to me that I didn't know. That really actually thrilled them.

>> Matt Raymond: Do you think that connection with them is really important to your writing process and how you're able to relate to them in your writing?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Yeah. And I think that having children was important, too, because I used to follow them around and listen to them. And one of them said to a friend once, "Be careful what we say in this house. It may appear in a book." But I think there is that connection. And I often wonder who I would've written for if I hadn't had children because I do value them.

>> Matt Raymond: So have a lot of your characters been inspired by people in your life? Is it a majority or are there composites?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I think they're composites. And you begin with this little kernel, this little seed of an idea of somebody saying something like my son John saying somebody has to have these photographer eyes. And then it's as if you're a painter, an oil painter, and you put on brushstrokes and brushstrokes of different colors and different dialogue, and you add to the character, and it changes it and makes it your own. So it may begin with that seed, but it isn't reporting as a reporter from a newspaper might do. It's different.

>> Matt Raymond: What can your fans expect to hear from you at the National Book Festival next month?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, I'll probably talk about my books that out and my ongoing relationship of writing with my daughter and maybe some of the struggles and what I'm going to work on next, because I really don't know, but I hope by the time I get there, I do know something. And then I like to listen to them.

>> Matt Raymond: What can you tell us about that relationship with your daughter?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Well, it's fabulous. I mean, she now is grown and has a two-year-old so she's getting everything she ever deserved, let me tell you. And when we write, I am so impressed with what a great editor she is. You know, years ago, I read to her, and she said to me when she was in college once, "You know, when I write in class, sometimes I hear your voice in my ear," which is kind of the essence of parent and child reading together. And so sometimes that comes up. But she's a better editor than I am. One time last month, I wrote a sentence and read it to her, and she said to me, "Are you really committed to that sentence?" Which was, I thought, hilarious.

>> Matt Raymond: Well, Patricia McLaughlin, we're very pleased that you took time out to talk with us today. Are there any parting thoughts or words that you would like to share?

>> Patricia MacLachlan: No, I just would think, keep reading, please. We love that, we writers. We love to have an audience.

>> Matt Raymond: Well, we love that message, too, from the Library of Congress, and we are eager to hear more from you at the National Book Festival. That will be Saturday, September 29 on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. And if you'd like more details and a list of participating authors, you can visit www.loc.gov/bookrest. Once again, Patricia McLaughlin, thank you so much for talking with us.

>> Patricia MacLachlan: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

>> Matt Raymond: This is Matt Raymond from the Library of Congress, and we thank you all for listening today.

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