



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **2024 Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards**

The Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards are presented annually to three outstanding scholarly books published in the United States. The 2024 winners are Gregg Hecimovich for his book *The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts: The True Story of The Bondwoman's Narrative*; Jeremy Eichler for his book *Time's Echo: The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Music of Remembrance*; and Emily Monosson for her book *Blight: Fungi and the Coming Pandemic*. This year, the Book Awards Dinner was held in person in Washington, D.C. in December 2024, where the three scholars discussed the impetus behind their books and the motives that keep them sleepless—and engaged—in liberal arts and sciences.

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Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

This special episode featuring our Phi Beta Kappa Book Award winners was taped at the annual Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards event. I hope you'll enjoy the conversation that we had with our extraordinary book award winners.

Okay, so let's get to work. I was thinking, each of these books, as I had the pleasure of reading through them, of something that Barbara Tuchman says near the end of her introduction to *The Proud Tower*, her, if you will, group biography, European biography, the decades before the First World War. Tuchman, as each of you labored long and hard in these vineyards, many interviews, much research, much archival work, and she says at the end of the introduction that she is consumed at the end of her work with all of the faces of those who contributed to it pressing to get into the book. "They haunt me now," she says.

So I want to ask each of you a little bit about those faces, maybe not haunting you, but inspiring you that were part of this journey. Gregg, you did extraordinary work with *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, but you're not the first one to pick up this text, you inherited, as it were, as you and Skip Gates say in his generous forward. I have to add Skip Gates, a Phi Beta Kappa member who we were just able to honor this summer with a Distinguished Service to the Humanities award. Both of you talk about the fact that there will be more birth records, marriage records, death records that will be found and more work will be done. So how did you see yourself in this sort of continuum of people working on Hannah Crafts?

Gregg Hecimovic...: I love this image of this line of people, a crowd of people, who are pressing against the glass that a writer is containing in two covers of a book. The work we do, I think of this all the time, over in the sciences there'll be a lab with an important question, and there's groups of people collaborating to discover new things. This is exactly what we do in the humanities. It's not a person who escapes into a cubicle and creates a monograph.

So in this story, Hannah Crafts who left this manuscript, a holograph manuscript, we don't have that for anyone else in this period. Particularly Frederick Douglass is all typed out, as it's gone through abolitionists' editorial apparatus. We have this unique voice of Hannah Crafts in the manuscript that Dr. Gates recovered, and the manuscript record itself is a number of people pressing together to advance the story that she tells.

When I began writing this book, I spoke with Dr. Gates. He's just been amazing. He's the most amazing, extraordinary man I've ever met. I love that man. He's a genius and generous. When he was advising me on writing the book, he told me, keep it narrow. Write on just Hannah Crafts. And I couldn't do that, and I felt like you did. There's all these other stories that surround Hannah Crafts' context and her life. All these other figures who were her friends, who told her their stories. So when she wrote her novel, she didn't write an autobiography. She wrote an autobiographical novel.

So it was for me, the journey of engaging that story took me into realms in the scholarly world. It took me into realms in local history. It took me into the communities that were the life force of the book. So the image of these many people is in the story. I was just teaching some of this history to my students, and there's a list of the characters who are a part of this novel. There's this rich history that forms any creative work, and for me, as a writer, developing that history. When I read these other works that we're discussing, I saw the same thing. The life force behind the art that we're uncovering is what we're trying to orchestrate as writers to bring back more fully and to get to the meaning of the work.

Fred Lawrence: So Emily, let's talk about the life force in *Blight*. It clearly has your voice, and yet you draw on, I lost count, scores of scientists and their work and their stories. How did you see yourself in dialogue with them and that dialogue then emerging into the manuscript and into the page and through you to us?

Emily Monosson: I felt like I was just giving them an opportunity to speak to a broader audience than publishing. I'm thinking that they're publishing their scientific papers. They're working in a field that they want the general public and more people to know about. Sometimes there are news articles written about stuff, but then it goes away.

So I felt like this was an opportunity to take all of their voices and put them forward in a way that maybe other people would read and then hear their story, and also to know that each topic that they're studying isn't just in isolation, that they're all connected from humans to crops, and that was one of the things that I wanted to say. I think the difficult thing is the voices that I didn't include. So all the people that I did interview and then I didn't include them, and that was one of the harder things.

Fred Lawrence: That's Tuchman's face pressed up against the glass. Right? That feeling.

Emily Monosson: Yes, so there were plenty. Yes. And I still struggle with that, with how do you interview someone and talk to them and spend time and then it just doesn't fit in or is under there, but it's not up here.

Fred Lawrence: Jeremy, your work is one of music criticism, of philosophy, of history, but at least on some level, it's also a tetralogy biography of these four individuals. I wonder what was your relationship with Britain, with Shostakovich, with Schoenberg, with Strauss before starting *Time's Echo*, and how did that relationship change over the course of the project?

Jeremy Eichler: I would say that I, in different ways, had a relationship ranging from affection to love to, in some sense, in some moments with Strauss, who I already knew was the most politically complicated, there was a real enjoyment of his music, but also knowing that I was going to have to grapple with a really complicated historical life. It turned out that they all had very complicated historical lives and this was something that I really wanted to, to the extent that it was a group biography, I wanted to really show them,

warts and all, to really take them down from the pedestals that they've sometimes occupied and really invite readers to see the contours of their personalities in every dimension, the fullness of it.

I will also say another figure whose work I quote often in the book is the German Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, who's writing on memory and the philosophy of history, was really influential for me at different points. Just this summer, I had the opportunity to visit a monument that was built on the coast. He committed suicide, fleeing Nazi Germany. He was turned back at the French-Spanish border and took his own life, near the end of the Nazi regime.

There is a monument that's built into a gorgeous cliff in Spain's Costa Brava, near the town of Portbou, and a monument to Benjamin. It takes the form of a staircase, a bronze staircase that bisects the cliff, and you enter from the very top of the cliff and it's angled down. You walk down lower and lower and lower, and you see in front of you just the sea, in this beautiful, cerulean color, just kind of beckoning. It's really kind of an image of freedom.

That monument clearly wants us to feel that Benjamin himself saw sort of glittering there just out of reach, and just as in his experience, your path towards freedom is blocked. You arrive, as you're walking down in the monument, you arrive at a glass screen onto which is etched one sentence from his thesis on the philosophy of history. The whole thing was extraordinary. This sentence gave me a lot of pause. I was there to honor Benjamin, this renowned writer and critic.

And the sentence that's been put into this glass was that, it is in fact easier to remember the memory of the renowned than it is to recall the memory of the anonymous. Historical reconstruction should be devoted to the memory of the anonymous. And for me, without having seen that sentence previously, that was also a guiding light for me. There are these towering figures whose biographies are presented in the book, but there's also a lot of really careful attention paid to the people that you've never heard of that were all around them and whose stories in some very basic way bore the truth of that era sometimes more clearly than the lives of these celebrity composers. So it was really important for me to tell their stories as well.

Fred Lawrence: Now, when I spoke to each of the three of you, there are parts of this job that I like, and there are parts of this job that are just great, and there's nothing better than making these three phone calls, I have to tell you. As the three authors know, I don't keep you on the hook and sort of say that, "Well, it was a hard decision and well, it was..." I start by telling you that you've won, and then I tell you that we're going to have this discussion and then look for a common thread through it. And of course, Esther promises that's what I'm going to do, and I think I found one that I want to try out on you and ask you to reflect, and I think the common thread is redemption.

So Emily, let me start with you. As everybody is thinking, *Blight*, a book about fungi, and Lawrence is going to find redemption. Well, I found redemption because you wrote redemption. Here's what you wrote. You wrote, "Some species will need our help to survive, and we will have to decide as a society how far we are willing to go to save a tree or a staple crop." In other words, it's possible. It's in our control.

A pessimistic line is "it's out of our control." An optimistic line is not "it's solved," but "it's in our control." And later you say, "If we choose to act on our hope, we have some motivation to right our wrongs." So I'm not proposing this as a promise of redemption, but is it fair to say that your book in part is a call to action to redeem that which is broken?

Emily Monosson: I'm going to be really brutally honest here. So it is, but I feel that also to write a book like that, writing the first whatever chapters, that was probably the last chapter, was easy, and then you have to have a chapter on hope. I could have easily not had a chapter on hope because that's the hard part to write. And sometimes when I do that, I'm like, can an individual really do that? Or is it a society? I mean, to be honest, can individuals really, how much can we do when it comes to that? Saving species, whatever? So anyway, yes, it is there, but I felt like I had to really search for it.

Fred Lawrence: Which we all do, and we may be in a time where the search for redemption is what we need to do. Jeremy, maybe in your case it's the easiest case or maybe I just see it there. I was struck by the fact that Britten, in his request for the premiere of *The War Requiem*, requested the audience not to applaud. He wanted them to be in the silence of the moment, and there is that extraordinary moment at the end of the last Requiem, "Aeternam dona eis Domine," and it fades to silence and it's just silence. Is there redemption to be found in the music about a calamitous war and the Holocaust?

Jeremy Eichler: Why don't you ask me an easy question?

Fred Lawrence: I didn't promise you they would be easy. I promised I would look for a common thread.

Jeremy Eichler: I think that part of me is cautious about the question of whether there is an ethical question with memory, all kinds of memory art, should the victim's memories, is there something problematic about aestheticizing their memories even as we commemorate them? Is it to aestheticize their deaths through art somehow to violate their memories?

And so I guess I would come at the question of redemption a little bit, or I came at the question of redemption a little bit differently in writing the book. I think one of the things that I felt, first of all, that was important to do, was actually if there is redemption to be found, perhaps it's actually in the telling of some of these stories itself, in the giving of names to the nameless, in the recreation of not just how various actors died, but also how they lived.

The book is about the Second World War and the Holocaust has these incredible ruptures, not just really ruptures that targeted any particular ethnic minorities, but ruptures for us as a society, as a species. I have a quote that it was a rupture in the kind of solidarity, that the core solidarity at the most basic level that we feel between anyone who wears a human face.

But I didn't want to start my story with the end, if you will, and so the story actually begins 200 years earlier. I have a quote from Thomas Mann who says that we shouldn't remember stories only by virtue of their ending, their beginnings and their middles also have a dignity and have a meaning that is also part of the process of redeeming them, honoring not just death, but also life. The last part of it, I wanted to say, was just that it was also about honoring these ideals that were so discredited by the Second World War and the Holocaust in some ways.

These ideals, this humanistic vision about the arts, that the humanities, the liberal arts, if you will, can actually contribute to who we are as human beings. They can form a form of personal education of the spirit, of the soul, of the mind, and that this was an idea, this idea that humanism has its own intrinsic value and worth. This was a book that also tried to salvage those kinds of sparks of hope that were placed in that tradition, even if those sparks themselves had been buried by the rubble of history.

Fred Lawrence: And Gregg, maybe yours is actually the easiest case for redemption, putting a name on a book that didn't have a name on it. And yet you haven't finished the work, right? The work goes on. So is it a partial redemption? Do you see it as a redemptive narrative?

Gregg Hecimovic...: I do, and I think it fits very much with what Jeremy was talking about, the anonymous. So before I started this book, when I went to Wheeler House, the house preserved by the family who owned the novelist when I would go there, there was nothing, this isn't uncommon, but there was nothing said. There was no record kept of the people who were enslaved. The Wheeler family said that they manumitted their slaves and sent them to Liberia. It was a lie. People in the community knew it was a lie. Black people in the community knew it was a lie. But it was a lie everybody in that community was willing to live.

This novel is a redemptive spark of the anonymous voice brought into art, right? Into a novel. When I wrote the novel, it wasn't just Hannah Crafts, it was the other enslaved people, the 26 people who were sold from Wheeler House and sent to New Orleans, almost none of them traceable, who created the profit that allowed that house to stand still. Boosters in the community and boosters in the state of North Carolina lovingly recreated the property, of the drapes, the carpets, the furnishings. Nothing about the people. Those people's story is the most joyful and powerful model we have for dealing with horror, trauma, and cruelty, and to not follow the light of that story is to impoverish everyone. So somewhere down in Florida, the Bondwoman's narrative is now not allowed to be taught in some school.

That doesn't scare me. That genie is never going back in that bottle. I'm following a bunch of other scholars who were telling that story, the story that a number of just trailblazing African-American women historians - Annette Gordon-Reed has always been a guiding star for me - that is our history. It's our most joyful, redemptive, powerful toolbox for facing hatred, racism, classism, and the potential extinction of human beings. We don't have to go that route, and we're seeing that. I felt so strongly in my long journey with Hannah showing me the way and those communities who have those stories.

So I feel very strongly the redemptive part of what history and art can provide, specifically through the genius of this one particular woman whose story was preserved and was preserved because of black people, was preserved because of Henry Louis Gates Jr. It was preserved because Dorothy Porter Wesley, the greatest librarian of the 20th century, got a hold of it from Emily Driscoll, who was a white book dealer who got a hold of it from Hannah Craft's stepson who preserved that manuscript, and it went into the property of his employers, a white family who were plumbers that he lived with. This is a story of joy, of redemption.

Fred Lawrence: So before we end, I want to ask one last question to each of you, and it's a question that is prompted by something I do at Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremonies. I tell the room full of inductees that I know many things about them just by the fact they're about to be inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. I know that they've gone to a very fine school for which they should certainly be proud. They got in there. I know they challenged themselves, it's the hardest program, and that they did well and succeeded at the highest level for which they should be very proud, and I also know that they've been blessed, for which you can't be proud, you can only be grateful and humble and responsible.

Somebody said the right word at the right time. Somebody played a role, turned the key as we like to say at Phi Beta Kappa, and changed their life, and I have to tell you, every time I do this, I look around the room and I can see it in their eyes, I can see who's doing it. They're picturing somebody. So I've drawn this out long enough to give you each chance to think of the person you want to talk about. Jeremy, it's only fair to start with you since you haven't gone first yet. I wonder, is there somebody who said the right word at the right time, who changed the path, who led you to think, I could be a historian, I could be a music critic, or who made the path possible as you look back on it.

Jeremy Eichler: I think there were many people that I really responded to... I'm one of the people like your inductees who was nodding as you were saying that, at least on the inside, because for sure none of us, all of us, I think feel really powerfully that we're standing on the shoulders of so many people who came before. In terms of my craft as a writer and just my belief that that was something, that words were a medium through which I

could communicate something, that was important, at least to me, if to no one else. I'd like to just say a word of credit to my 11th grade English teacher.

Fred Lawrence: I just have to tell you, this kind of answer happens more often than not.

Jeremy Eichler: Her name is Marilyn Hubbard. She was also a pianist, though I didn't realize that until later in life, and the first thing she did actually was kind of call me over after I had done my first assignment of the term, and actually give me a lot of criticism. I had been kind of coasting through at that point because I had a certain facility with putting words together in a sentence. But no one had really done me the courtesy or really given me the gift, even you could say the blessing, of seeing beyond what I was putting on the page to realize that there could be much more that I could develop as a writer. She helped me see that. She helped show me how to do that, and if she hadn't made that little micro moment of intervention and of sort of setting a standard or setting a bar for me myself to then pursue, who knows what would've happened beyond that. So thank you.

Fred Lawrence: The reason I resonated with that is because my mother was somebody's 11th grade English teacher. She taught high school English for 40 years and as I used to tell her, I like to think that as a law professor I've made a difference in my students' lives. She changed people's lives, lots of them. And that's different, that story. Emily?

Emily Monosson: I think I would say my dad. So for many years, my dad, I was a toxicologist. I studied PCBs in fish, and for many years my dad was like, you should write an editorial. You should write this, you should write that, stuff that's out there. And I'm like, "Dad, scientists don't do that." I said, "I'm writing papers and I'm not writing that and I can't write that." But my dad is somebody who went to MIT and he flunked English twice, and then he started writing in his business and had a column. And I mean, he just wrote in a very natural way. And so I think that combination of many years, so I didn't write for many years, and then I finally thought maybe, and I think I didn't because he told me to.

Fred Lawrence: You wouldn't be the first person with that story.

Emily Monosson: Luckily he was still alive when I wrote my first book, which I think he couldn't understand much of, but he was very proud. So that just made me feel like I finally listened to him.

Fred Lawrence: Beautiful. Thank you. Gregg. Last word.

Gregg Hecimovic...: Yes, it would be very much the same. A long line of blessings from amazing teachers, and it goes all the way to contemporary time. Working with Henry Louis Gates Jr. for a number of years on this project, I mean, no greater gift. He read every single word, and I don't know how he has the time to do the sort of mentorship he does, and I'm just one of many. It goes down a line. There's Jill McCorkle, who is my



creative writing teacher at Chapel Hill. We can go into my high school at Charlotte Catholic, and I'm just going to trace this back to Mrs. Cupps, who was my first grade teacher, and I remember this. I do this when I'm teaching writing to students because it means everything to me.

What she would do on my first papers, attempting to write simple stories and sentences, she would put a sticker, it was a scratch and sniff fruit sticker, and the deepest memory I have is just the joy and the pleasure to not get a paper with marks and marking things out. There would be fruit that I would scratch and sniff, and in this way, I always thought that writing and editing was a type of nourishing, warm, caring thing, and my entire career as a writer is following that response that has encouraged me to continue to do so.

When I teach writing I spend a lot of time drawing fruit in the margins in my students' papers just because it's that drive, that gift that our teachers are giving us to encourage us to do. It's very hard to write. We finished books and then we're all talking about what our next books are and how we're all struggling on our next books. So that sort of long line of encouragement, starting with Mrs. Cupps and her scratch and sniff stickers.

Fred Lawrence: Well, each of you has given us that encouragement. Each of you has given us that scratch and sniff moment of the sheer joy of brilliant writing, of caring writing, of passionate writing, of joyful writing, permit me, of redemptive writing, in a time that is dearly, dearly in need of redemption, not just as individuals, but for our society to be sure. We are delighted to honor all of you tonight. Thank you for being with us.

This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Toshiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

**CITATION:**

Lawrence, Fred, host. "2024 Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards" *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, January 13, 2025. [www.pbk.org](http://www.pbk.org).

Produced by:

