

simran-jeet-singh-keeps-going

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SPEAKERS

Simpsons, Dr. Anthea Butler, The King and I, Megan Goodwin, Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:17

This is Keeping it 101, a killjoy's introduction to religion podcast. This season our work is made possible in part through a generous grant from the New England Humanities Consortium and with additional support from the University of Vermont's Humanities Center. We are grateful to live, teach, and record on the ancestral and unseeded lands of the Abenaki, Wabenaki, and Aucocisco peoples and our guest is coming to us from the lands of the Munsee Lenape.



Megan Goodwin 00:40

What's up, nerds? Hi, hello, I'm Megan Goodwin, a scholar of American religions, race, and gender and I- I should have come up with a dad joke for this bit.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 00:48

Hi, hello, I'm Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst a scholar of religion, Islam, race, racialization and history and- oh! I got one! Boy are my arms tired?



Megan Goodwin 00:57

Yeah, no, no, that- that- that didn't work IRMF. But- but- but- but anyway, we're thrilled

because none other than Dr. Simran Jeet Singh is here with us to talk about representation, children's literature, and public scholarship.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 01:11

Say hi Simran.



Dr. Anthea Butler 01:13

Hi, Simran.



Megan Goodwin 01:17

Now we shall introduce you formally as we are a very formal port- and- "port"-cast, yeah, good. We are very formal podcast. Dr. Simran Jeet Singh is a renowned educator, writer, and activist who is perhaps best known for his public scholarship about religion, racism, and justice. He was a Luce/ACLS fellow for Religion, Journalism and International Affairs, and a Visiting Scholar at New York University's Center for Religion and Media. He was the 2018 Peter J. Gomes Memorial honoree from Harvard Divinity School. NYU's first Sikh chaplain, serves on way too many advisory boards to mention, hosts the Spirited Podcast and the "Becoming Less Racist" web series. And he is the author of the must-read best-selling children's book: Fauja Singh Keeps Going. His next book is about Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhi.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:05

And we're thrilled he's here, not just because he's a dear friend of both of us for many, many years, but also because he's a scholar and fellow nerd out in the world doing the damn work. His (too numerous to even mention) articles, podcasts, advisory roles, advocacy- It's all just such an incredible example of applying that religion PhD. So anyway, welcome to the pod Simran.



Megan Goodwin 02:26

Yay.



Dr. Anthea Butler 02:27

Thank you, I'm a longtime- longtime listener and a big fan, so, really excited to be here.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 02:32

So we are going to do THE 101. This is the part of the podcast where we do some Professor-work.



Megan Goodwin 02:39

Simran, we're asking everyone this season what the most basic, most important takeaway you want our listeners to know about your work, or what you're doing in the world. What's- what's your 101?



Dr. Anthea Butler 02:49

Yeah, it's a great question. I think the- I think the big takeaway in terms of what it means to study and understand religion, is actually not really about religion at all for me. I mean, in a sense it is, but- but at the core of it for me, what's most important, the- the real 101 is learning how to connect with people, and seeing what makes them human, seeing what makes them different, seeing what makes them move within this world. And I think doing that, for me, at least, my- my experience in this process and what I try and do in my work, is to try and open our minds up to different experiences and worldviews and possibilities. And- and I've really personally benefited from that. It has- it has helped me develop a more global perspective and has helped me move out of my own egocentrism. So- so studying religion isn't just about acquiring knowledge about people who are different, and fascinating, interesting, I mean, it is, it's definitely that but it's also something that can make us better human beings, make us more inclusive and thoughtful and compassionate and loving. And I think that's so important in our world. I mean, especially right now, religious literacy is cool, and knowledge is good. But knowledge alone isn't the solution to our problems. As a society we're more educated than ever before, we have more college degrees today than at any other point in human history. And yet look where we are, hate crimes are surging, hate violence is surging, hate groups are surging. Knowledge alone is not going to solve all our problems. We have to do more to equip ourselves, and our kids to deal with the difference we encounter in the world around us. And I don't, I mean, I don't just say that as a scholar of religion who has these ideas in theory. I say that as a brown-skinned, turban-wearing, beard-loving dude in modern America, who has real experiences on the ground that this is- this is a matter of life and death for people all across the world who look like me, but also who come from minoritized religious backgrounds, and marginalized groups of all kinds. And so I mean, I think we really have to expand how we think about the value of understanding religion so that we can be more intentional and proactive in making that interventional difference that we need so badly right now, both in ourselves, but also in our communities.



Megan Goodwin 05:22

Once again, you're so nice, and I'm still confused about how we're friends. But I'm glad that we are.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:30

Well, that's mean to yourself. But Simran, I think I- I also am shocked that you slum it with the likes of us.



Megan Goodwin 05:43

Thank you.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 05:44

Yeah, we appreciate you. Both for the work that you're doing out in the world to like, operationalize, or apply, or put feet on the ground in- in the, like, activism way that this is- this can't just be heady knowledge, because headiness doesn't get us anywhere. And I really appreciate the work that you do. And as a friend, I really appreciate that I get to have the image of you doing the work as something that drives me when I feel like we get critiques about being not objective, or being too activist, or being too loud, or too extremely online. I think- I think you're one of the people I really think of, "Okay, why do I do this work? And why do I do it in the way that I do it?" And so...



Megan Goodwin 06:30


Yeah, yeah, what it takes- and like, who gets to opt in to doing that work versus who has to do that work, because they are out in the world as like, a brown-skinned, turban-wearing, beard-loving dude, who gets racialized and minoritized regardless of, like, how heady you try to keep your work. So yeah, yeah.





Dr. Anthea Butler 06:49


I appreciate that. Thank you. I mean, I, obviously, as friends, I take a lot of that from- from the both of you as well. And so I think- I think there's a real camaraderie in this space of public scholarship where, at least- at least in my experience of it and the- on this side of religious studies, the people who are doing the work are not doing it for selfish reasons. Like, there's there's a real service element to it. And I think that's why we all are on the same page. Like, we're doing it because it feels like the- the right thing to do, the

responsible thing to do, the just thing to do. And so yeah, I really appreciate being in relationship with the two of you and what you- you've been doing through this podcast and all the other work that you do.

 M Megan Goodwin 07:37
Aw, go team.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 07:45
So this season, because we're doing all these interviews, we've got a new segment called GETTING TO KNOW YOU.


 T The King and I 07:52
Getting to know you, getting to know all about you.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:00
This is the section where we talk with our guests about why they do the work they do and how it relates to them as people. So Simran, one of the things I love about your recent work, is that it's a kid's book.


 M Megan Goodwin 08:14
So good.

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:14
And I have small children. So we get to read your book, and I think my older kiddo thinks it's about sports. And my little kiddo likes the pictures.


 M Megan Goodwin 08:28
They're so pretty.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 08:31

But I really read it and I find something new to be excited about it every time I read it and I'll be honest, my kids really like this book. Partially because their buddy Simran is the author, and partially because they just- they know I quite like reading it so they're- they know that I will say yes to like the fourth reread, whereas other books I will NOT say yes. Like, you get that book once a week at best. I'm looking at you Go, Dog Go.


 Dr. Anthea Butler 09:01
Oh my god, the worst.


 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:03
It's such like a neg-y, horrible, like, I don't like your hat. And it's, like, girl, if you like your hat, just wear your damn hat you don't have to please that stupid boy dog, anyways, I hate that book so much.

 Megan Goodwin 09:15
Wait, hey, hey, Ilyse, can you remind us what Simran Jeet Singh's latest book is called?

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:20
Fauja Singh Keeps Going.

 Megan Goodwin 09:23
What's it about?

 Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 09:24
It is about, uh, I- I- Centenarian Fauja Singh, who is the world's oldest marathoner and started marathoning very late in life.

 Megan Goodwin 09:36
Yeah, like in his 90s, right? I say having read it, and then completely forgotten.



Dr. Anthea Butler 09:40

Yeah, he started- he started running in his 80s and he ran until the age of 104. So yeah, just an incredible human being. So yeah, I appreciate that. Thank you.



Megan Goodwin 09:48

But, you like- you have a PhD in religion from, like, Columbia and you're fancy so like, what the hell you doing writing children's books, man, like, why does this matter?



Dr. Anthea Butler 09:57

It is- I mean, it's so- I appreciate you saying it like that, because it's- that's the same question I get from a lot of scholars in a more coded way...



Megan Goodwin 10:08

Less obnoxious- but you're welcome.



Dr. Anthea Butler 10:10

Yeah, exactly. And I think the point is, I get zero street cred among scholars for doing this, right? And that's fine. I don't have an academic book out yet. But I think to me, it's- there's a few things going on here. And one of them is, you know, I- I don't- it's not just that I don't have the luxury of- of writing an academic book that might be read by 100 or so people, like, I don't- I also don't really have the interest in doing that. I mean, I do like the academic work, I appreciate scholarship, and I like reading it, and I will write those books and will sort of publish my dissertation as a book. And I- I think that's important, but also, there's so much more that needs to be done and when I- you know, I look around at the world, and especially when my daughters were born, I started looking at these books, like- like, Go Dog Go, which Ilyse loves but I don't. And I'm just like, man, what- what- how do I get these- how do I get these values that I want to instill in my kids through- through these picture books? And there are good books with good values, not all of them, but also, how do I use these stories as ways of helping my kids connect with people who are different from themselves. And that's not just racial and ethnic and religious difference, that's also in terms of ability and age. And so that's why Fauja Singh's book really speaks to me- it's intersectional, in that sense, his- his story is really, to me, a story that helps us- it helps us humanize people that we tend to either dehumanize or ignore completely, right. Like when- when was the last time any of our kids thought about somebody who's elderly? Probably, I mean, when would they have that opportunity? We don't talk about them. And especially in this country, where we say, you know, the pandemic's hitting, let the elderly

go, they're disposable, right? So like, I don't want my kids to grow up like that. I really want them- I want all of our kids to grow up seeing the humanity in everyone that they meet. And so that- that to me, like is is the real driving force behind this. What- what is- what is- what is the value set? What are the- what's the worldview that we're bringing to our kids in a really intentional way? And I don't, I mean, there's some of it out there, but certainly not enough and- and to do it through the story of a Sikh protagonist, right? Like no mainstream publisher up until now had ever published a children's book with a Sikh character as- as the main protagonist and like, that hurt as a kid. Like I remember- I remember just wishing and constantly looking for books like that. I even remember a librarian once saying, it's not relatable. But when I- when I asked her why there weren't any books about people who looked like the people in my family, she said, "it's not relatable," and she wasn't being malicious. Like, that's just what she thought. And at the time, my takeaway was, "okay, so- so you're saying people don't care about me," like, I understood loud and clear what- what the real message was behind that. And then when I started shopping this book, around Fauja Singh, I got the same message from publishers and agents saying, like, nobody's going to publish a book about a Sikh character, because nobody- nobody can relate to that. I think this is, I mean, you can't say it in that moment, but it's very clear that there's- there's real racist undertones to that, right. Like, why are they not relatable? It's because they look different. That's it.



Megan Goodwin 13:45

Yeah.



Dr. Anthea Butler 13:46

Like, why are people not caring about the farmer protest in India right now? It's because it's being led by people who look different, and who have turbans and beards anyway, it's- it's- that's, I think, really a driving force for me behind this.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 13:56

Yeah. And I have to say, Can I- again, we read this book a lot, it has been the gift I give to all of my people who have small people that they are in charge of this year, or since it came out and- and I think that what's really smart about it- or what makes me so angry when I see colleagues either dismissing, or, um, get like shitting on the idea of that you would do- or that someone would do the kind of public scholarship that is small, right? Like that a children's book is small, you can only have certain number of words per page, there are pictures involved. But the thing is, is that I- I see theory on every page of this

book, like the way that you talk about ability, and disability in this book is marvelously nuanced and smart and completely in conversation with some of, like, the cutting-edge, ability-disability scholarship that's out there, right? Like, talking about how you know your own body and how you and you alone can know your own limits and not necessarily so that you conform to ablest norms but so that you achieve what you are capable of rather than accept what someone tells you you are capable of within frameworks of ableism. And I see, like, obviously, religio-racial, ethnic, linguistic nuances and diversity. But at the end of the day, what shocks me is that, like, I- well, it doesn't shock me, I guess I shouldn't say that. But like, this is a sports story. This story speaks to me because this is a sports story, right? This is about, like, deciding you have a goal, and then like setting about achieving it. And then, like, doing that, regardless of the- of the limits and constraints that others put on you, right. So whether that was ethnic, or religious, or ableism, or ageism. It's- it's that like, there's running involved, that's delight. And so it makes me so crabby, when people undersell the value of this kind of work. And I- I am curious, which is my obnoxious way of cutting people down to size. But I am curious if the- if some of the critique about taking big ideas and making them short sentences, and for, you know, my Si Guy is what, three? If it's just that other academics can't do it?

M

Megan Goodwin 16:33

Well, and I'm going to- I'm going to hop in before Simran starts talking, because I think this is so important. And I think it relates to our next question about public scholarship. But a thing that I think we see in the academy a lot is: "my ideas are important, and I need to get them out" without a regard for audience or impact, right? We measure impact in terms of like, how often we get cited not like, does this change the way that people are in the world? Whereas like, you can't write a kid's book and not care about audience. If kids don't like your book, they're not gonna read it, like, they just are not gonna care. And to be able to not- not decomplexify. Because Ilyse is right, like, all of that theory is undergirding the story, but to be able to communicate it so clearly is- the, like, caring about audience and caring about clear communication, I think, is what makes impact possible and it's also a skill-set we just are not encouraged to cultivate in the academy. So like, I appreciate you, man. Thanks. Thanks for that.

D

Dr. Anthea Butler 17:36

Yeah, thank you. I mean, I'll speak to some of that. I appreciate the kind words and I'll say, to your point- to your point, Ilyse, around- around the framing of ability and disability, I have to say, I learned a ton through this book. And it was- it was actually quite eye-opening for me. You know, I work a lot in the in the Diversity and Equity and Inclusion space. And I consider myself an expert, I consult with, you know, different corporations

and, you know, big and small, nonprofits, on these issues. And so, ability and disability is something I talk about. And one thing I learned very quickly in writing this book, and it made me humble, was that I couldn't quite get the story right. Like, I knew there was something wrong in how we were presenting it that there were some ableist tropes that we couldn't deal with. I mean, especially- the real ableist trope was, Fauja Singh's personal experience, his real life experience was, he wasn't able to walk, and he kept trying, and he kept trying, and he never gave up, and eventually he was able to. Which is true, and I want to present that as part of his biography, but also, I don't want to send the ableist message that everyone who deals with disability just needs to try harder, right? They're just being lazy, and they can overcome whatever they're- they're enduring. And so we actually brought in consultants- disability consultants, and so I think that's something- it's- it's a- it's something I really learned, from both in terms of like, you can be an expert in something and still have more to learn, which we all know as scholars, we all know that there's- there's so much more out there than us, but, like, without the humility to- to accept that to really embrace it and to look for guidance. You're not going to get it right and you're going to- you're going to mess up, right? And so I think that's- that's something, and then the other thing that really struck me what you were saying, Ilyse, and this is just, you know, a sort of personal reflection. I think part of- part of my drive from this derives from the way that I've been racialized and learned how to deal with it, which is, and you see this in Fauja Singh's own story, and this is where it's coming from in terms of what you said, I think racialized and marginalized people from a young age, early in their experiences they have to learn to stop seeking validation from the world around them and to really find it within themselves. And that's something that I came to terms with at a young age that like, people are going to think what they want about me, I have to be confident in myself and- and really be clear about who I am and what I'm about. And like...

M

Megan Goodwin 20:15

You like your hat, and you should just go ahead and wear your hat and not want the big dog to approve of your hat.

D

Dr. Anthea Butler 20:20

Yeah, exactly, it's called a turban...But- Yeah, but I mean, it's like, you know, if- the- the refrain in the- in Fauja- in the Fauja Singh story is- his mother tells him from a young age and it comes up throughout the book, "you know yourself, you know what you're capable of, today is a chance to do your best." And that really speaks to me, like, I understand why people in the academy might be critical, I understand our culture, and that you don't get any points towards your tenure portfolio or academic credentials for writing a children's

book. But I know myself, I know what my community needs, I know what I believe in. And so I'm going to do it. And, you know, it's- it's not that, uh- it's not this approach of like, I don't care screw everyone else, it's more like, I understand where you're coming from. And I'm empathetic to that. But also, I know what I need to do. And that's just a different way of operating. And- and I really attribute that to having these experiences of- of being minoritized in this country.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 21:34

You have been really good at knowing yourself and of doing what you feel like you need to do. And one of the things that is a through line of your work, is this question of representation and public scholarship. So I guess, um, how do those things overlap and line up, how did you come to make that decision, not just about knowing yourself, but how does that outward-facing work fit in with, um, who you are, and how your scholarship functions?



Dr. Anthea Butler 22:03

Yeah, I mean, there's a really long story here, I'll try and give you a medium-length story. But the story really begins as a child growing up in this country and realizing from a very young age, that there's this extreme tension between being hyper-visible, right, like, everywhere I go, people see me on the streets, they see me in the grocery store, they noticed me on an airplane, and definitely on an airplane, and- and like eating unseen at the same time, right? And that's- you know, there- it's not just about children's books, and movies and TV, it's like, even as you've talked about in your previous podcast episodes, like there are "world religions," textbooks that leave out my community, and it's- it's so bizarre to see that happen, but also it's- it's so frustrating, like, there's a real feeling of pain that comes with being rendered invisible. Like, it's that moment when that librarian told me when I was a kid, like it's not relatable, like, nobody- nobody cares, right? Nobody cares about you, even though they see you and you know that they see you. And so that- I think that- that's part of the psychology, right, Sikhs have been in this country for 100+ years. And, and still no one knew who they were. And my parents, I mean, they- they very much noticed that when they immigrated here, and felt it and, and saw the danger in that ignorance. And so we- we, I think, kind of navigated really locally in Texas, where I was born and raised, dealing with with the kinds of racist incidents that would come our way. And then when 911 happened, I was a senior in high school and you know, the- the nature and the degree of racialization really amplified, like, just completely different-level. And I- and I realized then- I mean, I sort of watched- I was too young to be very helpful in that moment, to really be completely active, but I was observing a lot. And you know, we were on conference calls every day with the Sikh community around the country trying to

organize responses. My dad- my dad, and my mom were very active in that, and- and it was then that I started witnessing how little community power we had. And that's when I- that's when I started to see a pathway for something that I could do. What I always wanted to do, to engage in service to be helpful, but I didn't know what that would look like. I didn't know what skills I had, what interests I had. But to see a community, and not just ours, but the- the entire MASA group like Muslims, Arabs, South Asians, no one was able to get a word in edgewise and really speak to their own stories. And- and so that's when I really decided that this was something I wanted to do. And so, I mean, it might- it might sound sort of backwards, in a sense, but I- I entered into scholarship as a way of building community power and creating a narrative. And this is not just, you know, I want to be on TV and talk about who Sikhs are, it's also within the Academy, right? There's- there's very little attention to Sikh studies, there hasn't been a monograph written about the founder of Sikhism in about 50 years. There- if you go to a Barnes and Noble or a Amazon or wherever, and you look for primer on Sikhism, that doesn't exist. So like, where are we? Not just in the public world, but also in the academy? And so to me that that felt like a powerful way to- to start doing that work and bringing visibility to Sikhs in a way that would be both- both empowering in the sense that this would help Sikhs feel empowered, but also would help cultivate power and acquire power for a community that was on the- on the far imbalance of power in a way- in a way that was really hurting. And so I think that- that's probably the best way to explain how I entered into this path.

M

Megan Goodwin 26:21

And that's gone like, super smoothly, right? Because Americans love religious freedom, and the Academy was like, very welcoming of being told that it's wrong?

D

Dr. Anthea Butler 26:33

Yeah, I mean, I- smooth- smoothly isn't the- the word that I would use to describe it, but it's- it's definitely been a journey. I've learned a ton along the way. And I think the biggest thing for me that's- that's really the thing that feels most important. It's- it's like, everything I do, I mean, not everything, but so much of what I do, it feels like I'm opening a new door or doing the first, being- you know, we were the only Sikh family in South Texas when I was growing up. We were the only Sikhs with turbans who- who went to school where we did, the only Sikhs with turbans in college, the only Sikhs with turbans- you know, I had to get the United States Soccer Federation to change its rules to let us play, my brother had to get the NCAA to change its rules to let- like, it's just over and over again, it's the same thing. But I think the politic is, that's cool, like, I'm fine with pushing that, but also, like, I have to figure out how to keep these doors open and let other people into and that's what community power really looks like and that's- that's a really difficult

thing to do. Because- because it- because it's such a difficult journey. It's a lot to push through. And so anyway, yeah, that's- that's just a reflection on that.

M

Megan Goodwin 27:53

No, and one of the things I have learned from- from you and with you about public-facing work is that, yes, it's absolutely important, and it can be really rewarding, but also it's not safe. It's not- it's not safer for anyone, because we say things in public, and people have opinions about it. But when you're already coming from a minoritized position, the blowback, the- the risk is exacerbated. And at the same time, like not everybody gets to choose whether or not they want to represent a whole community. Like, you don't have to go in and play soccer and be like, I'm going to teach you all about Sikhi. I just want to play the damn game of like- let me play the game!

D

Dr. Anthea Butler 28:45

Exactly.

M

Megan Goodwin 28:46

So I just- like, this is- this is a thing that I really appreciate: you being so candid about is- like, there are genuine risks involved in doing this work, no matter how important it is. Appreciate you. Thanks.

D

Dr. Anthea Butler 28:58

Yeah. Yeah, thank you. And I mean, it's- that's a really difficult thing to- to forefront, because part of the strategy of mitigating risk is to pretend like it doesn't bother you, right? You don't want to show people that- that it gets- that it gets serious, because then that that invites more attacks, right? If I was to- if I was to share some of the death threats that get under my skin and and create some tension in our personal lives, and then more people would do it, right? And- and- and- and also there's- there's another kind of risk to mitigate against and that's- that's professional risk. And that is, you know, I- when I was on a tenure track position teaching Islamic Studies and ended up on the professor watch list. And- and I spoke to some lawyers and they, you know, just- just to see like, can I put up a defamation suit because of what these right wing sites were saying about me? Which felt- I mean, which- which were untrue and really causing harm. And the lawyers basically said, well, you can pursue a lawsuit if you want to win some money, but if you want to keep your job, you should never say anything. And so I didn't, like, I never- I never said anything, until I eventually left that position. So I could, you know, stay with my family in

New York, which was the bigger priority for me. But I think that there's a real risk to professional stability and in an Academy that doesn't really look out for and take care of- I mean, it's- I think that's part of the reason why they don't look out for and take care of the people who do this work and face these risks is that they don't understand, right? People who are running these orgs, and universities don't really get what it means to to have these kinds of threats come up in your life. And like, the kinds of, you know, precautions you take, especially when you have children, my entire approach and willingness to take on risk changed dramatically when my first daughter was born. Like, my wife and I had a conversation we said, you know, things that I was willing to- to put myself in front of before like, I- I can't anymore, like both because of my daughter's safety, but because I have responsibilities to my family now that I didn't before. So anyway, there are a lot of considerations, and they're usually not brought front and center for good reasons. But I think it's important for people to know that these- these things come with real costs. Yeah, there are some significant costs. And it doesn't mean that I, you know, I'm not looking for sympathy. And I'm not looking for like extra congratulations or anything. But these are- these are real things that you should consider when you're looking at people doing the public work, but and also, when you're looking at doing public work yourself, like, you should weigh these and be really mindful about what you're getting yourself into.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 28:59

Yeah.



Megan Goodwin 31:38

Yeah.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 32:02

Let's- let's make a hard pivot from-



Megan Goodwin 32:05

Death threats.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 32:06

hate crimes and death threats, to the next project, which could you tell us about it? I know

you're writing a book about Guru Nanak, in part to fill the gap of there simply not being one-



Megan Goodwin 32:21

in half a century? What the hell? What is wrong with us? I know it's racism. Anyway, sorry. Go ahead.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 32:28

But tell us about it. Like, yeah, just it doesn't need to be long-winded. But we'd love to hear more about it so that we can, you know, hype you and stuff.



Dr. Anthea Butler 32:36

Oh, thank you. Well, let me say so there are two books in the works. The one about Guru Nanak is- it's based on what I uncovered during my research work. And part of what I uncovered was, how can it be that no one's written about him in- in decades, like, think about how many books come out on on Jesus or the Prophet Muhammad or the Buddha every single month, like, this- it's- it's- it's hard to really wrap your head around that. And so that's- that's what I'm trying to do, and, you know, the initial vision for it was let's- let's do an academic representation of Guru Nanak and bring forward the sources, and that's what my dissertation was: really looking at that information and the earliest accounts of his life. And now, I'm thinking well, wouldn't it be more valuable to bring it to the general public first? And so that's- that's the shift that's happening there. But before that book comes out, I actually have a book coming out next year also-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 33:37

Did I me- did I mess up your, like, filmography here? I totally did, didn't I? Yeah, tell us about what's next.



Dr. Anthea Butler 33:43

Well, what's- what's next is a book that is- it's very much a weaving together of storytelling, religious literacy and- and wisdom. It's- I'm trying to draw from from Sikh wisdom, Sikh teachings, that gives us a way of understanding both how we deal with some of the big questions of our time, you know, what is what does it look like to- to be confronted with hate and still respond in a way that aligns with our values? What does it-

what does it look like to love your neighbor when they want- like, they literally want to kill you and not give in to- not give in to something so soft, that it puts yourself at risk, but also not give in to something so hard that you then become hardened, and embittered, and angry and so those are some of the questions I explain, but- but in doing that, I'm really trying to show the experience of what it's like to be in- in the skins and in the bodies of Sikhs in this country, what it feels like, and looks like to be- to be racialized in- in this particular way. And that's where the storytelling really comes in and an intro to Sikhism, you know, bringing in some of the basic history and- and traditional elements, so that, you know, people who have never had the chance to- to look at or study Sikhism in any way will have some information because, I mean, where else would they go at this point? There's- there's no way really and so that's- that's what that book is about. And yeah, that's- it's- it should be out in about a year or so, and I'm really excited about that one.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:39

That's awesome.



Megan Goodwin 35:39

That's super exciting. Although I'm pretty sure we don't say "Sikhism." It's Sikhi because Sikhism is Imperial.



Dr. Anthea Butler 35:44

Oh, yeah, thank you. I like that. I forgot who I was talking to what the-



Megan Goodwin 35:50

I learned. I learned that on the internet.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 35:53

From some dude named Dr. Simran Jeet Singh.



Megan Goodwin 35:58

A solid half of my Sikhi class is just like here's another thing Sim said.



Dr. Anthea Butler 36:02

Well, okay. Let me tell you, since- since we're here, now, let me tell you the next book that I want to- that I- the children's book that I'm trying to figure out, that's so hard. But I'm trying to think about borders and family separation and detention, because of all the things happening in our country right now. And I think the way that I want to do it is through telling a story through partition, and



Megan Goodwin 36:27

Ooh.



Dr. Anthea Butler 36:27

Yeah, getting into some of the stuff around colonization and communalistic identities and things like that. So anyway, it's- it's- yeah, I thought the two of you might-



Megan Goodwin 36:39

Children's book about partitions is super interesting and also like really dark in an Edward Gorey, sort of way, and I'm here for it.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:44

No but like, we just got- we just got- Celia just got- for Hanukkah got the book, "The Night Diary."



Dr. Anthea Butler 36:51

Oh, it's fantastic. Very great.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:53

Right? And that's like a similar-



Megan Goodwin 36:55

I don't know that one.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 36:56

It is a book by- Oh, goodness.



Dr. Anthea Butler 36:59

Veera. Veera Hiranandani.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:01

That's it. Yes. Um, and it's essentially written like a diary of a young girl going through partition. It has very like Diary of Anne Frank vibes to it, or like Numbers of Stars, if you've read Holocaust children's literature. And that's where we are at with our daughter, and so I- I am really mindful of putting all of the historical events in context. And so like, right, like, our suffering is not just ours, it's global suffer. And so like, what- how do we think about all these things? And so that's our like, mama-daughter book for the next month.



Dr. Anthea Butler 37:32

Oh that's awesome. It's such a good book. I love that book. And it's actually be the same-



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:35

I have to read it ahead of time, but we- like, we literally- it came in the mail yesterday. So I don't- I haven't- I haven't read it yet. But-



Dr. Anthea Butler 37:40

Oh, you'll love it. I mean, I think this is- this- so this is something that I think we can be doing in our classrooms. And I do this when I teach actually, is like, there's no reason we shouldn't be assigning young adult literature like,



Megan Goodwin 37:55

Oh, totally.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 37:55

Totally.



Dr. Anthea Butler 37:56

or children's books. Like I think I haven't done this yet with the Fauja Singh book, but like this is- this is very much a story about colonial Punjab. Fauja Singh was born in 1911, and there are some really important elements that come up in the story around what it means to be colonized, what communalized identity looks like, like Fauja Singh writes in a script that Punjabis today would not recognize as their own. But it's the script that he wrote in, it's the same script that my grandparents wrote in, right? So like, what does it mean that we now think Urdu is a Muslim language, and Hindi as a Hindu language, right, like, there are all sorts of lessons to take from these. Yeah, I'd love to see us do more of that our pedagogy.



Megan Goodwin 38:36

Putting it on the syllabus, I'm into this. Time for HOMEWORK!



Simpsons 38:46

Homework, what homework?



Megan Goodwin 38:48

In the last episode, we assigned lots of things to prepare for- um, to prepare our beloved nerds for your classroom visit today, thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Singh. Following Judith Weisenfeld in Season Two, we thought we'd ask our guests what they've written or made, that they're most proud of. So hit us, what- what are you proud of? What work have you done that you're most proud of?



Dr. Anthea Butler 39:09

Oh, thank you for asking that. I will- I will mention three very different things that are coming to mind. One is, I co-wrote with my wife, who's a human rights researcher, an article for CNN this last week, an opinion piece around the farmer protests in India. And that was- I can't tell you how difficult it was to land that piece. It's the- it's the most time I've ever put into an opinion piece. I've probably written four or 500 in the last decade or so. And the biggest challenge, there has been no media publication really cares. like nobody's covering the story, even though it's the largest protest in human history. And so, you know, I think the other reason I'm proud of it is: there are a lot of conversations around the specific legislation that people are protesting, but there isn't much around the historical context and how this fits into a pattern of neglect and abuse. And so my wife

and I, having worked on these issues, and we're actually co-writing a book on this specific topic.



Megan Goodwin 40:25

Of course, you are.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 40:26

Of course you are, you guys are like THE power couple of power couples I have ever imagined. Sorry, keep going. You're doing amazing work and you're proud.



Dr. Anthea Butler 40:34

Yeah. I mean, it was- it was just- I think we were able to help shift the conversation a little bit, from a very sort of momentary focus on what these bills are doing into a national platform that looks at why are people so upset in the first place? And what are all of the root issues that need to be addressed as opposed to simply rescinding this legislation. So that's- that's one that comes to mind. Another piece that I wrote this summer that I'm really- that was really difficult for me to write and it's been on my mind for a few years, was- was the piece around- around policing. And it was coming it- you know, the piece that I wrote, the essay, came out of the Black Lives Matter protests and conversations around police brutality, which I witnessed firsthand in New York, and defunding the police, which I believe in. But also, as part of my civil rights work, I advocate for the- the amending of policies that allows for religious garb, to- to be allowed within- within military and police uniforms. And so that has been a really difficult thing for me to reconcile, personally, I mean, I believe in both of those things, that people should have the right to choose- to choose to serve if they want to. And also, let's- let's defund the police and the military. And I've never really explained my position publicly and it's been really hard to- and I received a lot of pushback for both of those positions and people saying, how can you- how can you be such a hypocrite? and so I finally wrote that piece and put it out there. And I don't know if- I don't know if it really resolves all the criticism, or at least the- the perspectives of people in their perceptions. But at least for me, I was happy to finally articulate and put in public my position. And so that was a good piece. And the last one I'll say is I've really enjoyed this web series I've been doing with the Religion News Service. We're gonna launch the second season in January of "Becoming Less Racist." And I've learned a ton from it, and I don't think there's anything like it out there.



Megan Goodwin 43:13

It's because I was on it, right? That's why.



Dr. Anthea Butler 43:14

Yeah, because you were on it.



Megan Goodwin 43:16

You're welcome.



Dr. Anthea Butler 43:17

And Ilyse will be on the next season. So that's the main reason.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:22

It's really us. Let us white ladies take credit for your work in public around racism. That sounds about right, right? That's what I was supposed to learn?



Megan Goodwin 43:30

You're welcome!



Dr. Anthea Butler 43:32

Yeah, exactly.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 43:34

And how we saved you.



Dr. Anthea Butler 43:41

This is why we're friends. Yeah, but I mean, I've loved that show, because I think it does- it does something really different while everyone is pointing their fingers at the problems in the world and there enough, I mean, there are tons to point at. This- this show tries to help us point within ourselves and really look at what we can be doing differently and how we

can really excavate some of these racist and homophobic and misogynistic ideas that- that are inside of all of us. And so yeah, I really enjoyed that show. And I'm really proud of it and excited for the next season.

 M Megan Goodwin 44:17

Yeah, it's really smart. And it's really accessible. It's the sort of thing that like, I saw land with people I went to high school with, in a way that nothing that I have tried to do on this issue did. They're like, "oh, no, okay. This makes sense. I get this. Okay." So yeah, good job. We're proud of you too.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:34

Yeah. And nerds, we will link to all of those things and more in the show notes. But with that, I think we're done.



Megan Goodwin 44:44

Yeah.



Dr. Anthea Butler 44:46

Woohoo.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 44:47

Peace out, nerds.



Megan Goodwin 44:48

Do your homework, it's on the syllabus.



Dr. Anthea Butler 44:51

Grab onto your butts.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:14

That feels so dirty that we made you do that.



Megan Goodwin 45:16

I don't- I don't think we made him do that.



Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst 45:20

No we didn't but somehow that seems, like, wrong... like we have corrupted you.



Megan Goodwin 45:25

Yeah, we're a problem.