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PROFESSOR: I'm here with Dr. Elisabeth McKetta and Kerry Garvin, and we're going to be talking about a few things. First of all, Kerry Garvin is-- I'm just learning as of today --is also an ALB alum, as well as a 2020 graduate of our ALM program in creative writing and literature. Is that correct, Kerry?

KERRY GARVIN: That is correct. Yes, I earned my ALB in psychology in 2017.

PROFESSOR: That's right. And I have to say-- we have to note that in 2020, when you graduated with your ALM, you were the co-recipient of Harvard's annual Thomas Small Prize, which is a tremendous achievement. Congratulations on that.

KERRY GARVIN: Thank you so much. Thank you.

PROFESSOR: And I'm here with Dr. Elisabeth McKetta, who I've had the honor of partnering with on numerous CARC webinars over the years. She is an instructor at Harvard Extension School. And I was just looking at the courses that are listed for you now Dr. McKetta, and it's a dizzying array of extraordinary sounding courses. You teach several pro seminars. You teach a course called Advanced Memoir, Advanced Fiction Writing : The Novel, Fundamentals of Academic Writing, she is one of our expository writing instructors. And it is my tremendous pleasure to have both of you here with me today.

KERRY GARVIN: Thank you so much. This is such an honor.

DR. ELISABETH Really fun. This is so fun.

MCKETTA:

KERRY GARVIN: Yeah.

PROFESSOR: It is. And it's a wonderful opportunity, as I was just telling you both earlier, this podcast has been a great venue for both instructors and recent graduates or former students to talk about the work that they've done in the faculty aide program.

So I do want to start there. I believe that's initially where you two had first met. The faculty aide program is-- to give a very short summary for those who are unfamiliar with it, it's a unique kind of program, an opportunity that's available to eligible, both undergraduate and graduate and pre-medical program students at Extension School.

And it's an opportunity for students to work on non curricular, extracurricular research that's being done by our instructors who teach in a variety of fields. So there are faculty aide projects in scientific areas, medical areas, management, psychology, certainly writing, journalism. So if you guys could take me through a little bit how that initial-- I think Kerry, you worked with Dr. McKetta as a faculty aide several times, I think four or five semesters if I'm not mistaken.

KERRY GARVIN: Yes. Yeah. So I actually met Dr. McKetta in my pro seminar class on the craft of writing in fall of 2017, which was just a phenomenal experience. Every single one of those students from that class, we've all stayed in touch, we have a Facebook group together. We all left that 2-hour long class just feeling like this intellectual euphoria. This high from discussing writing and reading, and just having such an amazing instructor.

And so actually, I think it was in September of 2018. I was going through my email and saw an email from CARC about faculty aide positions and I saw a posting from Dr. McKetta. And I thought, OK, whatever this woman is doing, I want in on. So I applied for it-- I sent her an email. And that was actually when she was working on a book on the Arabian Nights and the myths that have arisen from that-- needed a research assistant from that.

And so I applied. I heard back from her I think in a day or two and got the position. And from there, I mean, my life has just taken a completely different course for the better because of the faculty aide position I served with Dr. McKetta. And, yes, thankfully, she kept me on for the last two years of the ALM program. And I'll hand it over you Dr. McKetta.

DR. ELISABETH MCKETTA: I mean, how could I not want to work alongside you forever. It is such-- it was so fruitful and so fun and-- When Kerry emailed, it was this wonderful email saying, "I see that you're working on the Arabian Nights. I took a class on the Nights, here is this sort of long list of some of the best articles that I found that were most helpful but seem useful for the questions you're asking. You want to work together?"

And it was this wonderful moment of "Yes". This thinking Kerry has so much to teach me. And whenever you're working on a book, you sort of write up to your skill level and then you hit your head on the ceiling basically, and it just felt like working with Kerry, we could sort of raise the ceiling a little bit and make the book much better, and that was exactly what happened. It was an incredible experience. And it is so fun.

I mean, in writing it's so fun because you are-- we're all in this great pool of-- we're all on this sort of great creative pool working on projects that will overlap in some ways but will also be completely their own beast. But at the end of the day, all writers are kind of hitting their head on the same challenges and having to wake up and get back to the project. All writers kind of share a few basic things.

And I feel like it's in the faculty aid program that really the sort of student-teacher relationship gets kind of, becomes one of colleagues, and that's the best thing that can happen. I feel all of my best teachers have at some point open their life to me as a collaborator. And I've-- it's been such, it's-- I've learned so much from them. And I'm--

One of them, I've been actually swapping manuscripts with for 15 years he was my dissertation advisor. And it just feels so neat to be in that chain of just sort of joining the parade of writers that get to keep bringing more writers into the fold and learning and teaching, and it just it's so it's so fun to collaborate. I just feel the best part about being a writer is getting to work with other writers. And the faculty aide program just allows that.

Through our work together-- Kara and I did incredible work on the nights project and then through our conversations ended up finding interest that we're just sort of little sprouts, such as wouldn't it be neat to write an anthology of women's resilience stories? Because we had similar questions, intellectual and personal that sort of led to that. Well, why not? Why not do it? And then through later conversations, wouldn't it be neat to start a cooperative book making press and see what happens?

So it feels that a lot of our conversations are these sort of random like, "Who, what if?" that then led to something else. And, what are other what ifs? I feel like we have so many what ifs. What are other balls in the air?

KERRY GARVIN: I don't-- I feel like every time we talk, we have another what if. It's just-- it's so interesting how our relationship evolved from, like, teacher-student to then faculty-faculty aide and co-editors-co-writers yet we're working on screenplays together, we started publishing press together. And now I count you as one of my closest friends. Even though, like, there's always kind of that like mentor-mentee relationship.

I mean, and this all blossomed from the faculty aide program. And my life has just, like, spun on this incredible course because of that, because of this opportunity, and meeting Dr. McKetta, and this wonderful generative, collaborative relationship that we've harnessed.

And now, I mean, it's like you said, like, once I earned my ALM last year, I started getting hired on as a college instructor and a creative writing instructor elsewhere. And now I'm bringing new writers into my fold and paying it forward in the way that you taught me to and that so many of the instructors at Harvard Extension taught me to. And it's just-- it's a beautiful experience. You know, not to get too mushy, but it's definitely cascaded into my life and to all the students that I teach and writers I encounter too.

DR. ELISABETH Well, it is. And I'm going to get totally mushy, because it is one of the most exciting things have that happen.

MCKETTA: And it does feel like-- I mean, I think Kerry you and I have in person met once? I think we had oysters together once, maybe twice at Grafton street, but all of our everything has been shaped through Zoom and through phone. And I feel the same way-- I count you among my closest friends.

And in my opinion, I feel the mentor-mentee has been, like, flattened into a pole. I feel like I learned from you easily much and more than you learn from me. I feel like we're both just in it learning from-- you've taught me so much about screenplays. You've said, all right, I'm learning this thing-- here's an arm, come on up, here's what you need to know.

So I just feel that there's this sort of lovely messiness, this lovely just sort of cauldron of teaching and learning that we're both just kind of in together. And we're both willing to learn on the ground, we're both willing to bring other writers in. It just-- it has been such a-- it's a magical program. I'm totally getting mushy. It's a really cool program.

PROFESSOR: It's so gratifying to hear this from both of you. This year happens to be the 20th anniversary of the creation of the faculty aide program. In that time, I think there have been over 1,000 students who have participated in it in 20 years. Each of them, I'm sure, has their own story, unique story and unique experience with the instructor or instructors that they worked with.

That's a great transition because I feel like I buried the lede a little bit. Both of you have co-edited an anthology which was published, I believe, earlier this summer, *What Doesn't Kill Her: Women's Stories of Resilience*. So I wanted to hear from the both of you how that project originated.

I do want to share, there's a lot of testimonials and quotes that have been given about the book. Gloria Steinem is one of those people. And she said when someone is ill, many old cultures say that they have lost their story. I believe that reading the stories in *What Doesn't Kill Her* will help each of us to trust and to tell our own.

KERRY GARVIN: Yeah. So this actually started in November, late November 2018. And it was a few weeks after the midterm elections in 2018 where there was the women's wave of an unprecedented amount of female politicians being elected to Congress.

But it's actually-- let me back up a little bit. It started when Dr. McKetta and I were talking about Los Angeles and how she had, I think in her mid 20s, had an internship out in Los Angeles and had kind of bottomed out during it. And so for me, I used to live in New York and worked in theater and had been in a couple really ridiculously small independent films. And I had been contracted to do a bigger film, and so I uprooted my life and moved to Los Angeles and kind of had a MeToo moment of my own.

How wonderful would it be to have a book that we could pluck from the shelves of women's stories. And from there, we just-- I mean it was like a train that just chugged along the tracks and did not stop. And we conjured up a plan to send out an email, a call to action to a number of women in our circle who were writers, who are academics, who are colleagues, but also non writers as well because we wanted to have as many women included in this anthology as possible.

And from there, two and a half years later it's been published, it was published June 15 of this year. But that was how it started. And if you want to take the reins and talk about how it took flight.

DR. ELISABETH MCKETTA: Yeah. Well, I mean, that was it. That was exactly it. It was a story of rock bottom, of sort of quarterlife crises, really. What are those vulnerable moments that you feel like it can't get any lower? And you grow from there and you rest back on there.

And I think the most exciting thing about it came together-- I love that you used the word conjure, because it really did feel almost-- I never want to say this about writing projects, it seems like it sort of jinx is it but it felt too easy almost. It felt just like-- we said-- we just like threw the magic dust into the air and then all the women, like 60 women are like, "Oh, write it." And then they wrote it and then we edited it and then we decided to publish it.

Like, it all just felt like [GASPS] it's happening. You know, it felt like-- it didn't feel like labor at all. It just felt like the book emerged and it was perfect. It was perfect. Books don't emerge like that. That just doesn't happen. But this book just emerged and it was perfect. And all the women in it were so excited and so all in. And so we had these 60 writers that we were kind of ferrying basically to finish the book.

And it was so much fun to get to work alongside Kerry in that capacity too. That we had been in a classroom, we had been doing research, we've been writing, helping each other with our own writing. But then this idea of sort of being part of an editing team with Kerry was its own form of magic. It was so much fun to get to kind of co-mentor 58 other writers together. It was such an incredible experience.

And when we were just given such gifts along the way. People wanted to help. People wanted to see the book on the shelves. People wanted to put us in touch with Gloria Steinem. If you want to see two 40-year-old women shriek, give them a blurb from Gloria Steinem. You would-- like, hopping around our rooms like shrieking on the phone. It was such a fun experience. I just think I'll always look back on this book as one that just felt like such a raising, such a group. It was just-- it was so fun to write a book with 60 people. And to get to do-- I mean, I just want to do that again and again. It was so much fun to do that with you. And anyway, I've said enough about it. But it was just amazing to put together. Unlike any book I've ever worked on.

PROFESSOR: So I wanted to ask both of you, as you alluded to, there are numerous contributions from many different writers in the book, could you give us a taste of maybe one or two-- or mention one or two that were highlights for you or resonated with you, just to give us a little taste of what kind of stories or what kind of writing is in the book.

DR.ELISABETH Our first-- one of our early titles-- we went through so many titles, but one of them had to do, was a Phoenix title,
MCKETTA: which we decided not to do because I think there are too many Phoenix books already. Yeah, too many Phoenix books so we decided we need a different title. But one was about literally escaping fire. One writer was in California fleeing for her life with her son, that one really left an impact.

Kerry made this amazing chart that kind of looked at some of the similarities between the stories. And there were some about sort of physical geographical relocation sort of traumatic events, some having to do with spousal change grief-- one woman was widowed in a war wrote about that, some had to do with motherhood not turning out the way they had hoped or not happening at all and that being a disappointment. So there was sort of-- I don't know, there's a whole constellation of stories but I think what stuck--

KERRY GARVIN: So many things.

DR.ELISABETH Yeah. Overlapped.

MCKETTA:

KERRY GARVIN: And I think what's surprising for me is one woman would start out thinking I want to write about this. And so for example, one writer, Awet Teame, who is an Eritrean American immigrant, started off she was going to write I think about body dysmorphia.

And we kept going through revision after revision with her and she finally came out and told me that we were really struggling to get her piece to come together and be something cohesive thematically. And there was something she was dancing around. And she emailed me and she said, "I think I want to write this piece about female genital mutilation. And the fact, I was cut in Eritrea by-- my mother you know endorsed this and had somebody come to our house and cut me. And I think all of this is actually going back to that. And it's something that I don't talk about."

She's a stand up comedian. She never talked about it before. She'd never written about it. Very few people knew about it. And she said, "You know what, this is what I want to write about." And from there, her piece became about female genital mutilation. And now she incorporate that into her stand up routine. She's actually a local Boston comic that she appears in Los Angeles and New York.

And I think that is a beautiful example about how these stories were really a metamorphosis for a lot of these women. Where it starts out being about one thing and then they dug deeper and you know-- We tried to be really hands off with the editing process and keep each woman's narrative voice true to them.

DR.ELISABETH I want to hop on that. I love that you brought up that example because it did feel like so many taboos were kind
MCKETTA: of removed in the writing. That it felt like that idea of women saying, "I will write about this but I won't write about that." Like so many essays became about that through-- And I would credit eukarya as being the first editor and reader.

Kerry spent sometimes two hours plus on the phone time after time to help, to listen, to be a sounding board to the stories that we're trying to come out and to help point to them and say, "It seems like this is what you're really writing about. And should we-- do we dare put that front and center?" And I think it was incredibly therapeutic. I think that's what we heard again and again.

We had a Zoom party after it was published. And what? 30, 40 women came. It was so exciting. And it was--

KERRY GARVIN: It was so much fun. Yeah. Having them-- like, finally being able to meet each other. Because they knew-- like there's this rich tapestry of sisterhood of the 60 women who contributed to this book and some of them knew each other, some of them knew us. But to see them all gather on our little virtual launch party was just amazing. And just talk about their stories and realizing that there's still so much emotion there too that will forever be attached to these stories in this book, and the sisterhood and friendships that have emerged from it.

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PROFESSOR: So that leads into what I wanted to close with. So I wanted to hear from both of you, you had mentioned earlier that you have a publishing endeavor together and I'd love to hear more about that. And also to give your input or advice to new students or incoming students. I mean, what would you share with students.

DR. ELISABETH Do you want to start with the press and go from there?

MCKETTA:

KERRY GARVIN: Yeah. Yes. I would love to. Actually-- Yeah, so the press. That idea, that little seed was planted, I think, back in 2018 when I was working as your faculty aide. You had discussed other faculty members at Harvard and how women's literature just feels a little bit harder to get published I feel like than more mainstream, male-centric literature.

And you had sent me a Word doc about your brainstorm about what a publishing collective versus a publishing company might look like. And so that seed was in the back of our head as we were looking at publishers for *What Doesn't Kill Her*. And we reached out to a lot of literary agents and a lot of publishers, and we kept getting the same rote response back that anthologies don't sell. And for me, there was the subtext of anthologies focused on women's writing and women's issues don't sell.

And there were some smaller presses that we could have gone with, but it got to a point where-- I think, Dr. McKetta, I think you initiated the conversation like, "Look, should we just start our own publishing company?" And I immediately went back to that document that you sent me in 2018 when I was your faculty aide about, OK, this is something you're dreaming about and you dreamed about.

And it was kind of one of those duh moments. Like, "Yes, let's start a publishing collective together." And that came about early 2021 when, yeah, we had grown tired of getting the same response about this book, and an anthology of women's stories and it not being salable and we have proved them wrong. It skyrocketed up to number six in the Kindle store I think within its first week for women's studies.

And I love the models that Dr. McKetta conjured up for a publishing collective. And I will let you speak to that because that is all-- that is your brainchild. That is yours.

DR. ELISABETH MCKETTA: Well it's the idea-- and Kerry gave it the sort of tagline, which I love, which is if you teach a woman to write, to make a book-- if you teach a woman to make a book, that the idea that-- I mean, there are so many sort of little pieces and this book has been our sort of first experiment with it. So we already have a pipeline of maybe half a dozen that were ready to experiment further and keep refining it.

But the idea is that rather than having a model that requires bestsellers to stay afloat, that in the traditional publishing model there need to be bestsellers because you've got a whole lot of people who you need to pay. Including the person who reads through the slush pile and has to write, "Dear, dummy. We can't publish your book." And we got a whole lot of those letters, a whole lot of--

One thing Kerry you didn't say but that I think you and I were also really interested in is that people would not only say anthologies don't sell, but again and again we would hear agents or publishers say, "I would love to read this but I can't sell it." So that disconnect seemed at the heart of publishing what sells versus what actually moves us changes us, what do we actually want to be reading versus what could sell.

And so it just seemed like if we took away some of that financial stress, there would be a lot more just kind of more freedom to publish things that you want to read without sort of worrying about how they sell. So in self-publishing, which I've also done in some of my books, it's just sort of one person making a book and that's that. And so I think what we're working toward is trying to merge those two models with--

So for example, one of our writers coming up is someone who Kerry and I both know from her first class, from the first person who wrote a gorgeous thesis, which is a fabulous memoir of maybe 70 or 80 pages. She's got a tremendous voice. She's from Appalachia. She's just got a story.

The length of her memoir makes it a length that would be really hard for traditional publishing to take on because it's not quite-- no literary journal could publish something that's 70 pages. But to make it a full length book you'd need to maybe triple it. And it's complete it, doesn't need anything else.

So for Lindsay's book, our plan will be that-- for the first sort of cycle of book, we'll call it, Lindsay's the author and Kerry is going to be the person who thinks about how the book will function in the world, who's sort of the head marketer person. And I'll be the main editor, the one who helps Lindsay sort of shape it, does the sort of final copy editing. And then we have someone else who's going to do with the design.

And our ideal version each one of the design, the market, the editing, we become kind of teachers and bring on other writers to kind of apprentice and learn that because I'm a second generation editor, I can teach someone to edit well. Kerry, you've taught me tons about how to position a book in the world, how to use Instagram, I didn't know that. And so you can definitely teach someone how to get a book in the world. And likewise, our designer Sarah, who's incredibly talented, could teach someone very well to design a book.

So the idea is that we have these people who are sort of learning using Lindsay's book as our kind of test case to do the editing and the design and the marketing. And then, presumably, those three apprentices will also have books in the pipeline next. So Lindsay gets all the proceeds from Lindsay's book, she'll put in the cost for it and get everything back, the rest of us are working as volunteers.

But as we move through, we kind of move through a book cycle that someone will be an editor and then there'll be a designer and then they'll do a book. And then maybe that'll be all they need from HMS press and they'll move on. That maybe someone else will do a few cycles with book. We've got another writer who wants to do a memoir and I think will probably be around with us forever because she wants to be making the book forever and ever.

And that allows us to sort of let the model outlive us too that there's always someone, learning always someone teaching. And that at the end of the day, no one is sort of stuck in one position forever because you can keep teaching women to carry on the making of these books. That whether they do well or badly, we've all kind of made a good book and done a good job to put it in the world. And at the end of the day, the writer-- it sort of falls on the writer. We're not getting paid, we're there to support the making of the book.

So it's just kind of a neat collective that should be the sort of organic organism that changes with each book and should be able to put out three or four books a year once we sort of get it going in that way. But really, really a cool collaborative model.

KERRY GARVIN: I definitely had become frustrated in trying to approach, like, publishing from a traditional perspective with literary agents being your medium before you're able to reach publishers. And I mean, I've never seen anything like this before where it puts the artist, the writer front and center and 100% of the profits go to the writer.

And it just feels like, why isn't everybody doing this? Especially like, I think we thrift shop our phrase of, if you teach a woman to write or if you teach a woman to publish a book like it very much takes a village to publish a book. From marketing the editing to book design. And it just felt so natural that, of course, like, let's create a collective where we have an editorial board and we have our go-to book designer or go-to editor, but then also each writer that comes into the fold pays it forward with our next writer.

And it just feels like, of course, this should be a publishing model that all publishing houses abide by if they really want to put writers and artists front and center. And of course, that's what we want to do because I feel like artists and writers get the shaft a lot in our society and particularly in publishing.

DR. ELISABETH MCKETTA: It's true. And I think it really also reflects the fact, this model reflects the fact that artists and writers need to have more than one life. That Sarah Turgay, our designer, is a full-time designer who also works, now works at Barnes Noble and who also writes her own books. She wrote a terrific YA in verse book.

And so this idea that rather than an author just being an author, which is not realistic. An author also-- I mean, if you think it, I mean you and I both are freelance editors. An author-- many of my writer friends make their living doing marketing copywriting. So this idea that it really, instead of just being monolith author or monolith designer or editor, if you come into the model you are all. You get to be all of them.

PROFESSOR: On that note, Dr. McKetta, Kerry, I want to say thank you so much. What you have both described is such an inspirational, I think, partnership. Hopefully, it's something that, well, maybe aspirational, I should say, maybe, for students listening to it, they'll work towards having the kind of collaboration and working relationship that the both of you have.

I want to thank you both so much for taking the time to chat today and I want to wish you both the best moving forward. And once again, thank you so much for your time.

KERRY GARVIN: Thank you so much, Chris. I really-- it's not hyperbolic at all to say the faculty aid program changed my life-- and change it for the better. I'm so blessed to have Dr. McKetta in my life and so many other instructors too throughout the ALM program. It was absolutely life-changing. And any time I can come back and support Harvard Extension, I'm so happy to.

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PROFESSOR: You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.