**THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW**

**A.M. HOMES: “THE UNFOLDING” OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY**

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Are you curious about how the US Republican Party became as crazy as it is today? You could read "The Washington Post" writer Dana Milbank's account of what he calls "The Twenty-Five Year Crack-Up of the GOP." Or you could read novelist A.M. Homes' "The Unfolding." And I think you'll find the latter is much more enjoyable if no less revealing. In my view, A.M. Homes is this country's most piercing quiet chronicler. Homes is the author of 12 books, including 1996's "The End of Alice" narrated by a jailed pedophile, "Music for Torching" about the buildup to a school shooting, and "May We Be Forgiven" which won the 2013 Women's Prize for Fiction. Her style is compressed, cool, even comedic, but I would challenge anyone who calls it cynical. I find it secretly, sometimes not so secretly, full of conscience. It is also eerily, keenly anticipatory. She didn't whip up "The Unfolding," which follows a Republican donor plotting a mob assault on Washington in the year since the January 6th Insurrection. No, she started writing it over a decade before. Homes, raised in Washington D.C. teaches in the Creative Writing program at Princeton University, and I am very glad that today she is my guest here on "The Laura Flanders Show." Hi, A.M.

**A.M. HOMES**: Hi, Laura. Thank you so much.

**LAURA FLANDER**S: Your opening scene, if you will, is very precisely chosen, and you pick the election night, 2008. And you're in Phoenix, Arizona. Why'd you pick that moment?

**A.M. HOMES**: Well, because that's where John McCain was. So John McCain returned to Phoenix where he lived and also to the Biltmore hotel where he and Cindy got married. And there's so much fact in this, but that was where his campaign headquarters was that night. And I really wanted to look at American history, American political evolution because I saw that night as being one where on the one hand many people, I bought a bigger TV that night, I invited friends over. We poured out onto the streets of New York City after it was announced that Obama had won the election. And I thought about, how do I look at this from the other side? How do I look at this from sort the point of view of older white men who are now truly terrified that they have lost their grip on this party? And also looking back a little bit earlier historically to the night that I went to sleep thinking Al Gore had won, and then I woke up and met a guy named hanging chad, right?

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Right.

**A.M. HOMES**: Who I'd never seen before.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: We all remember him.

**A.M. HOMES**: Yes. So I feel like there was an evolution in the sort of structure and control of the Republican Party from within that by the time Obama had won, the elders of the party really did start to feel they'd lost control. And then as we got towards Trump becoming the nominee, that to me in some ways became proof that they'd lost control. And that's not even, obviously, in the book, but watching that evolution. And I think I can picture the guys in the book later debating like, did we make Donald Trump? And the notion would be, we wouldn't know if we did because that would be our plan in motion, that it wouldn't be traceable back to us. And I also feel like that also unleashed the incredible, that always had been there, rampant racism and sexism in this country that now we've seen just growing and growing and now with the rollback of Roe and so on, I just think, wow. And the libraries being, the books being pulled back and the librarians being told you can't send a kid to another library. It's a very, very scary time.

**A.M. HOMES**: It was very helpful for me, for you to start on that day because as you said, it reminded us of just how aggrieved a whole population was about the election of, I think your protagonist calls him, an African in the White House.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: What drew you to get inside the head of the Big Man? What got you to do that as opposed to just focus or just ridicule?

**A.M. HOMES**: For me as a writer, I've always had this almost habit of picking, in a way, the least likely character to tell a story. So at “The End of Alice," who's the least likely character to talk about how we as society have done a bad job dealing with sexual abuse of children? A pedophile. I think, who's the least likely character to talk about the explosion of racism and sexism in this country? An old white, rich guy. So there's that piece of it, but I also feel like there was something for me on a deeper level of wanting to have some other sense of understanding of how this person evolved, what their own sort of trajectory had been. And it prompted interesting conversations for me like with my editors in the UK who said, "You know, this guy and his cohort the Forever Men talk a lot about how they want to preserve democracy." And she goes, "But I see them doing the opposite so what are you getting at?" And I said, "Well, that for me is part of what's so interesting because the notion of what democracy is is no longer agreed upon. And so his version of democracy, he is dating back to the Founding Fathers where probably many other people's version of democracy in this country would have occurred on that night when Barack Obama won."

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Well, just to quote a wonderful line from that scene in the hotel room, you say "Being in that hotel room," this is the Big Guy reflecting, "Being in that hotel room on Tuesday," the election night, "listening to men speaking in platitudes was a night unlike any other. It was the long goodbye, the end of not just an era but the end of the America as dreamed

by our fathers." And there are many quotes like that capturing up how the Big Guy thinks about things. His wife ends up in a Betty Ford clinic. His daughter is having her own dramas at school, and he's kinda left alone with the guys, and they have a kind of "Lord of the Flies" madness come over them. Talk a bit about what you were able to accomplish by focusing on this sort of all-male buddy-buddy scene.

**A.M. HOMES**: I'm always very interested in the difference between our public and private selves. And I feel like even within a family, people have selves that are private from the family. And so the Big Guy by himself plays war in his basement. He uses Agent Orange on a ping pong table to defoliate fake trees and so on. His Agent Orange is orange Jell-O, you know? And then later in the book there's a scene where he takes them all on a hunting weekend at his ranch in Wyoming and a bunch of private military contractors show up essentially to sort demonstrate how you play war in real time. So there is this both absurdity and question about how men play war. How do men behave when left to their own devices in that buddy-buddy way, and also in the very kind of jocular, competitive kind of top this, top that. And also even the language. I used to go to all these talks where Jack Welch would talk about GE and Lou Gerstner would talk about IBM and the way, you know, they're running things up flag poles and throwing them down the field and all of these kind of euphemisms for different kinds of action. So that interested me, and I also on another level wanted to have the Big Guy and his cohort be a little bit like Dr. Strangelove. I wanted to push them into the kind of absurd and surreal. And then what was super scary for me as a writer was, every time I thought I was pushing them maybe too far, reality was intruding and pushing them further in the real world and so I had hoped to have the book out by the last election. I'd hoped that it would all be done, but publishing takes a year and I wasn't finished in time for them to have that lead time. And then when January 6th happened, people started calling me going, "Aren't you relieved? 'Cause you'd be in big trouble now." So there's that piece of it where I thought, I am both slightly relieved and really horrified because I think in some ways guys like the Big Guy, so wealthy white Republicans have been able to spin, pay for, dispatch a kind of propaganda that is not accounted for. And so we don't know where it came from, but it definitely was very useful in inciting violence.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Well, I'm reminded of something that I've heard you say about women in political fiction and how that's a field normally left to men, and women, on a feminist kind of lens brings a whole different aspect to it. And I wonder if you can talk to that for a little.

**A.M. HOMES**: Traditionally, men have written what we call the great American novel. I call it the pretty good big book because I even think great American novel's a lot, but that has been the purview of men. And it's very different than in other countries where you have Hilary Mantel writing and all these other wonderful writers writing big books, but here that's what men do. And it is the social, cultural, political novel. And women are supposed to write the small interior domestic book. And so I really wanted to weave those two things together in a book and to

juxtapose the intimate domestic narrative of the family with the Big Guy and his cohort. And to try to kind of in some ways claim that space a little bit more of, what is a big book that is neither entirely political because I also think the political is, as we see now, all the more with the Roe stuff and the libraries. The political is the intimate. It is the domestic. And so that was super important to me. And the interesting thing is when you Google political fiction, books by men come up. If you Google political fiction by women, just 'feminist' comes up so it's not even an allowed thing. If you're doing that, you must be a feminist and you must basically have an ax to grind. I'm like, no, no, no. That's not how this goes.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: There are studies that show men really don't read women authors and same with race. You know, white people do not read Black authors, African American people do read everybody else. That kind of divide in the literary world is another one of your concerns.

**A.M. HOMES**: I had this wonderful writing teacher, Grace Paley. And Grace would say that women had always done men the favor of reading their books and men had not returned that favor. I'll be like, giving a book talk somewhere and a man'll come up and pick up my book and look at it. And he goes, "I'm going to tell my wife about this." And I'll say, "I think you might like it. It's actually about two men or two brothers" or whatever, which one it might be. And they'll go, "I don't read books by women." And I'll say, Literally, "I will give you a copy of the book and I will have lunch with you afterwards." And they're literally like, "No, no, no, no, no, please don't." Like, "Just move back."

**LAURA FLANDERS**: And what do you think that's rooted in?

**A.M. HOMES**: I think that they feel somehow that that's not masculine enough, like they shouldn't read books by women, that those are for women. And the other piece of it that's very disturbing, so even in the selling of books is that, you know, there used to be bookstores. And then probably about the 1970s the bookstores, in an effort to help books find readers categorized. So all of a sudden there was 'literature' and 'fiction', and then there was 'Black fiction' and there was 'women's fiction' and there was 'gay fiction'. But all of a sudden what that meant was that that big fiction section in the middle was white man's fiction. And people were then just dismissed out of it. And it's the same thing, literally, with history that if you wish to study history that includes women all of a sudden you have to take women's history. If you wish to study history that includes an enormous African American and African global world, you must take Black history. There is not any sense still in our just standard curriculum that there are histories and they all are woven together and need to be represented together and explored together.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: If you write those accurate intersectional histories, you end up on the banned book page.

**A.M. HOMES**: Absolutely.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Or the banned book table at the front of your bookstore.

**A.M. HOMES**: Yes, exactly.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Which is, I think, perhaps the best place to be at this point. To go back to your book for a second and to the news and to your kind of perceptiveness around the news, this summer we learned that the largest ever political donation, I think it's something like $1.6 billion in shares of a company that was about to be sold at a huge profit was given to a nonprofit started by the co-chair of the extreme-right radical legal organization The Federalist Society. And the mission of that nonprofit when I read it sounded exactly like something out of your book.

**A.M. HOMES**: Exactly.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: To maintain and expand human freedom consistent with the values and ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. It feels to me that your characters and perhaps Leo feel about entitlement, you know, they're right, their righteous role in politics.

**A.M. HOMES**: Absolutely, yeah.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: The way that the rest of us look at corruption and that government is supposed to intervene at this point. Is it too late? I mean, going back to your Washington story, you grew up in the era of Watergate reforms and attempts to control money in politics.

**A.M. HOMES**: Looking at 2008, one saw two things. One saw the rise of social media in campaigning, and we all applauded Barack Obama for using some of these new tools. They hadn't been used by politicians before. And at the same time, there was also the beginning of what now is an open tap of dark money flowing in where all of a sudden, so you have people disseminating information, ideas, propaganda, whatever it is they want to do that is in no way traceable. And so that part is where we are right now, which is, I would say very, very dangerous in the sense that we've lost track or some people have lost track of what is a fact, what is actionable, what is real. And the problem with that is, as what we're seeing too, even with the fallout of Trump's presidency still is absent any consensus on what is real and true, all bets are sort of off. And that's the thing that is most scary. The Republican Party, I would say, is now like almost, you know, it's like a bull fight in the truest sense because someone will die at the end. You know, the bull will die, or the bull fighter will die. And that seems to me a very dangerous way to play this game. And politics is a game. And so I think one always has to be mindful of that, but now you're playing it knowing that if you tell people to come to Washington and take

over the Capitol, they will. And so that's the piece I feel like a lot of politicians haven't quite absorbed, that they also need to be accountable for these very inflammatory ideas and words.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: While we're talking about inflammatory ideas and words, I'm reminded of the attack on Salman Rushdie, and you along with many writers in the New York area, participated in a gathering, a reading in his support on the steps of the New York Public Library. We're going to play a quick clip from that event.

> **A.M. HOMES**: Originality is dangerous. It challenges, questions overturns assumptions, unsettles moral codes, disrespects sacred cows or other such entities. It can be shocking, or ugly, or to use the catchall term so beloved of the tabloid, controversial. And if we believe in liberty, if we want the air we breathe to remain plentiful, and breathable, this is the art whose right to exist we must not only defend but celebrate. Art is not entertainment. At its very best, it is a revolution.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: At the time of this recording. Salman Rushdie appears to be recovering, but we're reminded once again, A.M., of the power of words and the discussion of free speech, which in the context that we were just discussing becomes very troubled.

**A.M. HOMES**: I think that literature throughout history serves both to document and comment upon the time in which it is created. And I think it's essential. It is as much a document as any letters written, as any other sort of historical element that we archive and trace and so on. And so I've always turned to literature in a way for the kind of deeper truth, almost a more psychological or emotional truth. And I think writers have to be able to continue to do that practice. It is akin to journalists who also, as we know, are under attack sometimes quite literally. The question of, what do you do with free speech when it is being used to create propaganda and to lie? I think hopefully there can be a system of fact checking. Hopefully social media outlets can be held in some way accountable. Then the question is, well, is it okay to disseminate that? And in theory you would say yes, if you really believe in free speech, unfortunately yes. But I think that also one has to try to have enough sort of footnotes to kind of annotate, where did this come from? I mean, I think that to me is more important in sort of thinking, what is the evolution of this idea? And how do we account for that evolution? And how do we account for how things find their way into the conversation? But fundamentally despite the fact that it can be very complicated, I think free speech is essential.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Some critics have used the word cynical in relation to your work. As you heard at the top, I don't think you're cynical. I also know you.

**A.M. HOMES**: Yeah, yeah.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: How do you think about that word? And how do you think about yourself and your mission? Are you a mission-driven author?

**A.M. HOMES**: It's funny, they used to ask Grace Paley, "Did writers have any kind of greater social responsibility than other people?" And Grace's answer was always, "No." Said, "I have the same responsibility the plumber has. I just have to do a good job." That said, I would say I'm aware of how limited time and life is, and I feel like I definitely want to make work that is about prompting a conversation. And that is not about creating characters that people go, "I love that guy." You don't have to like them, but I want people to be caused to have questions, to debate, to wonder about things. I also, of course, want them to be entertained. I want people to laugh. There's a lot of funny stuff in this book. For me, humor is really also a social tool and a political tool and a cultural tool because I want to cut in a little bit deeper, make people laugh and then say something even more provocative in some ways. But I guess I don't feel like I have a singular mission, but I do care a lot. I'm not particularly cynical. I'm probably very moral in a sort of boring way. I don't know, you know?

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Finally, I guess, are there limits? Are there limits to compassion and empathy for your characters when some of them, I mean, you've had this question around the pedophile, but I can imagine you perhaps getting them again around "The Unfolding." In your effort to understand these kind of crisis-struck sons of ancient fathers wondering what their role is, could you go too far?

**A.M. HOMES**: I was talking with the novelist, Jeanette Winterson as I was writing this book and I said, "You know, it's so political and I'm worried about that part because I'm not a non-fiction writer. I'm not a true historian." And she said, "Stick with the characters." And I think for me as a novelist, the idea of telling the truth according to the character, so what is organic and true for that character is the most important thing. Am I telling their story? I don't invest in notions of likable. I don't even think so much about compassion. I think about who they are as a human, and that piece is really interesting to me. And I would say for any person, I don't think there is a limit to try and understand who they are as a human. I think our individual compassion or capacity for that could be altered, like if someone in my family was hurt January 6th, physically injured, I would feel differently about certain people because my anger and my personal relationship would be different. But on the largest scale, I'm interested in human behavior. What compels us to do what we do? I'm just fascinated by that.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: Sounds like you're kind of hopeful.

**A.M. HOMES**: Well, I think, you know, it's always, and I remember getting asked this after 9/11 when "This Book Will Save Your Life" came out and people criticized me because it had a slightly optimistic ending, just a turn towards optimism. And I thought it is interesting to think

about how to be optimistic or to think on the upswing when living at a time that is not inherently optimistic. And I would say we are now in a time that is not inherently optimistic, but I think that we as humans, again, it is a human drive to survive. So I'm thinking, I want to do what I can. I want to have the conversations I can. I want to keep people awake and talking. I think that is the one thing I can do. And have a laugh. I mean, they have to be able to have a laugh, too.

**LAURA FLANDERS**:I think we share that mission. Wake up if you're falling asleep out there.

**A.M. HOMES**: Totally.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: You wouldn't be listening here. I would say "May We Be Forgiven" is your most optimistic and hope-filled novel. I read it not, I guess, that long after 9/11 and found it truly unputdownable and just a joy actually in a way that I didn't expect so I'm all for it. We often close and I'm gonna close today by asking our guests what they think the story will be that the future tells of this moment.

**A.M. HOMES**: Well, it's interesting. So I am a fiction writer. If I were to tell the story of the future of now that following this moment, there was a profound shift and transformation and that the generation that has held power for so long slowly faded off into the sunset and a new generation, a very different-looking and different-gendered people were able to grow into those roles and to show that power when held across divides and power when held by different races and genders and so on is actually true power and is true democracy.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: A.M. Homes, it's really been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for taking the time.

**A.M. HOMES**: Thank you so much for having me.

**LAURA FLANDERS**: There's fiction based on fact and facts you wish were fiction. The journalist Barbara Ehrenreich who passed away this month at the age of 81 brought us decades of narrative journalism that introduced us to memorable characters like the elder still working for a pittance cleaning motel rooms or the young cheerleader hired to sell dubious doctors on the latest wonder drug or the women hired at Walmart who almost upon being hired are offered help applying for food stamps, welfare, assistance because the company knows that no one can survive let alone support a family on what they pay. "The New York Times" obituary of Ehrenreich was headlined, "Explorer of Prosperity's Dark Side," to which she would've said, bitingly I bet, that this wasn't prosperity at all, but rather pain. The pain of millions of the people she called society's anonymous philanthropists who give their all and get almost nothing in return. Was her humor sometimes mean? I don't think so because she meant it. She meant that this was wrong and we could change it and we have work to do. You can find some of my

interviews with Barbara Ehrenreich over the years through our archives at our website. And don't forget, we also have a podcast which you can find all about right there. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and mean it. Thank you, Barbara. For "The Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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