Speaker 1: Welcome to The Window.

Nick Colangelo: In 2016 Lisa Lucas was selected as the executive director of the National Book Foundation. She is the first woman and the first African-American to hold this position. The foundation sponsors the very famous National Book Awards. Prior to joining the foundation, she served as publisher of Guernica, nonprofit online magazine focusing on writing that explores the intersection of art and politics with the international and diverse focus. Also, she served as director of education at the Tribeca Film Institute, Sundance Institute, San Francisco Film Society and a Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. The Window is brought to you by the Belin-Blank Centre, part of the College of Education at the University of Iowa, and I'm your host, Nick Colangelo.

Lisa is shameless in her advocacy for reading. She wants all children, all adults to thoroughly enjoy the experience of reading. Lisa, welcome to The Window.

Lisa Lucas: Thank you so much for having me.

Nick Colangelo: This is a good town for you to be in, because Iowa City is a city of literature, we have the Writers Workshop, but we have is so many people who just enjoy in their hearts the idea of reading and reading books. So I think your messages will really resonate very well. Can you just take us a little bit back, Lisa, in terms of when you get started about reading as a little girl? Also, if you want to mention some of the books that really got your attention as you were growing up?

Lisa Lucas: Sure. I grew up in a house full of readers, which is how it often starts, a lifelong love of reading. My grandmothers, both of my grandmothers taught reading. My grandmother on my father's side was actually a first-grade teacher for many, many years, and then she became an assistant principal, and then she became a principal, and then she became superintendent of district in the Bronx in New York City. But what she started doing when she was really very young was teaching little kids to read. So she was just super excited.

I remember the story that she tells me again and again and again and again and again is the story of when she taught me how to read. It's like, no credit goes to the teachers, no credit goes to my parents, it's just my grandmother was the one who did it. But she was always bringing books to me. They always felt really special. It always felt like the thing that I could be most pleasing about. It's like, if I if I read a book and I loved it, everybody was like, "Look at Lisa loves a book, it's so great." So it's like, as an attention-seeking child, I was really into it. My mother also was a huge reader, my stepmother is a huge reader, my grandfather was devoted to these little paperback mysteries, he was always reading one and falling asleep with it in his chair. It just was always around. I think it was just, I can't remember a time in my life when books weren't a part

of it. As a little kid, though, I mean, I remember ... Do you remember that book The Lonely Doll?

Nick Colangelo: No.

Lisa Lucas: It's a children's book, it has this pink and white chequered cover, and it has this picture of this doll that's sort of very ... This is a bleak book, it's about this lonely doll and there's this black and white shots of this doll playing by itself and feeling very, very lonely. I just loved this book. I mean, I just ... [inaudible 00:04:10] I was in my mother's house taking home some of my old books and I was dying to find this book, because it's one of the most indelible memories of my childhood was that I love this book. I don't know what that says about me, whether I was just a depressive child or what? It's like, this book was just fantastic.

As I got older, I always loved the communal act of reading. So as I became like a preteen and people were reading Babysitters Club and people were reading the Sweet Valley Junior High, the books that I think I was allowed to read, and then Sweet Valley High and all these books that were series that everybody was very excited about and everybody was sharing books. I loved that. I loved that you could trade a book with a friend or you could talk about a book with a friend. But I also loved fantasy, anything that was kind of ... as a very young person, anything that created a world that was different than the world that I lived. But then, I was the same way that I am now, I would read anything. So I also loved the classics, like Bunnicula, or the Mixed-Up Files of Basil E. Frankweiler was a favourite, I really wanted to sleep in a museum so badly. Anything set at a boarding school, which alarmed my parents.

I just loved being able to be transported. I still feel like that. Sometimes I'll have a horrible day and be really unhappy, everything's the worst, what's going on, and then you'll read a book and 10 minutes later you're in it and you're just not where you were anymore. I think as a kid, I think that was something that happened really immediately for me.

Nick Colangelo: For me it was a little bit different book. My first love was the Hardy Boys. But I understand what you mean, when you just can't stay away and you get into that world. You talked briefly about the fact that when people think about reading, it's sort of an alone activity. You think about, pull the blanket over me, I just want to enjoy my book, but it's also a communal activity.

Lisa Lucas: Absolutely.

Nick Colangelo: You've been promoting that. Talk a bit about both the individual aspect of reading something you love and then how it reaches out to community.

Lisa Lucas: Yeah. I mean, I think that idea that books are solitary enterprise is just so false. Any kind of ... Yes, if I'm sitting in a movie theatre, and I'm watching a film, that

is a solitary experience in many ways, but we don't think of film as the solitary thing that we do. It's something that we talk about, we tweet about, we share with our friends and our family and it informs the way that we think about things and they enter into the general way that we speak about lives. I think that books are the same way. I mean, so every time somebody says catch-22, I'm like, that's because of a book, that doesn't exist until a book is written and somebody reads it and somebody talks about it and somebody thinks it's a clever way to explain the world and then it becomes a part of our collective understanding of the universe that we inhabit.

So I think that it's important to keep reminding people, as we get more digital and we have all these different ways that we can engage and there's so many more TV shows and so many more films and so many more film festivals and so many more books and so many more stories so many more podcasts, everything is just coming at us, and I think that we retreat around books, because they take time. I think that we have to remind people that it's just as pleasurable to gather around a reading experience as it is to gather around any kind of cultural activity that we want to discuss with the people in our lives.

Nick Colangelo: You're still fairly new as the executive director of the National Book Foundation, okay. Why don't you share a bit about what are some of the things that are expected of you, but more important, what's in your heart about, what you would like to accomplish as director?

Lisa Lucas: I just want to turn us into the biggest loudest most effective megaphone for books that we can possibly be. I think that's the goal. I think there all these little sub-goals, right, you want this many people to watch the National Book Awards and this many people to buy the titles and this many people to get free books and all these different little things, but at the end of the day you just want to engage people, you want to connect in a real way. You want to come up with new ways to connect. I have this hilarious celebrity list, which is just every single celebrity that I've ever heard mention of them being excited about a book or seeing like an Instagram post or have heard was in a book store buying 20 books. It's like, how do you get those people to amplify?

I mean, it seems [inaudible 00:08:39], it's like, I need a famous person to tweet about a book, but yeah, I want all the famous people who read books to tweet about books. So I just really wanted to figure out how we can build a slate of programmes that really takes our little power, which is just like seven people in a little office and a 68 year old book award and a few programmes that we're pushing, pushing, pushing and turn that into something that changes an enormous number of people's reading lives.

Nick Colangelo: What do you think it was about you that got the committee to select you to be the executive director?

Lisa Lucas: I think, ultimately, look, I don't think it was really that interesting. I think I'm like a hardcore arts administrator. I started when I was 21 years old. I really like

thinking about strategic plans. I really like budgets. I really like thinking about how nonprofits work and can be sustainable and can run. So I think that's the underpinning of what I do. I think I talk a lot and I go in public and I'm very enthusiastic about loving books, but I think at the end of the day it was about wanting to look at an organisation and say, "What does this look like in 10 years? How do you make sure that more people engage with your work? How do you make sure that your work is sustainable? How do you fundraise for it? How do you bring stakeholders and partners into it?" I think you have to have a really legitimate desire to do that kind of work, to do the loud, out in the world work, because it's all tethered together. You're building a community.

It's like, what I do fundamentally is build a team, my team of seven people that work with me in the office, and then I build a team of writers who are invested in the work that we do that will judge the awards. Then you build a team alongside your board chair who's going to help you build a board of directors that's going to sustain and nurture and make sure that you stay aligned with your mission and your values. Then you build a bigger team of people who just want to pay attention to the work that you do.

So I think that that's all really anchored by thinking about the nuts and bolts of what goes into that. But I think also, I mean, I think everybody doesn't grow up and say, "I want to work in books. This is my dream. I want to go work at a small nonprofit that promotes literature." That's not everybody's dream. I think I just really passionately love it. I remember the month that I was in the middle of the most rigorous part of the interviews. I mean, I just was a nervous wreck and wanted to die all the time, because I was just like, "There's nothing else I can do. This is it, this is it for me." It's like, if I don't get this job I have to go live in a Siberian yurt.

Nick Colangelo: Thank God you got the job.

Lisa Lucas: I think that that kind of passion, too, aligned with just the experience as an administrator probably set it down. I think it's interesting because it's like, I am the first woman and I am the first black person or a person of colour. I don't know that my board was really thinking about that, to be honest. I don't think that they were like, "Yes, this is what we need." I think they were just like, "We need somebody to do this job well." I think they were a little bit surprised when we announced it and everybody was like, "Oh my god, there's a young black executive director at the National Book Foundation." And they were like, "Yeah, I guess we did do that."

Nick Colangelo: Good. Good. I've heard it said, as I said you're shameless in your enthusiasm and the passion [inaudible 00:11:59] that you just get in the faces of Uber drivers, people on the bus, so forth, start talking about books. I mean, you take your job with you, I think, every place you go. Just talk a little bit about some of the people that you didn't even know but somehow a discussion got going about books and you had an opportunity to be Lisa.

Lisa Lucas: Well, I always say, "You can't do this kind of work unless you fall in love." Right? I'm a really bad employee, really bad work if I don't love the work that I'm doing, the worst. I don't feel like sending that email, I don't feel like doing that thing I'm supposed to do, it's all really annoying. But if you fall absolutely head over heels in love with what you do, you can do it. I think that that's the way that I work, that's the way that I did it at when I was at Tribeca, where I was the director of Education, and that's how I did it when I was at Guernica, when I was the publisher, and that's the way that I do it now. That means fairly ... I mean, I don't know that it's healthy, but a fair intermingling of the self and the work.

It doesn't matter if I'm in the supermarket on a Saturday, wearing flip-flops and just buying some cherries, it's like, I'm going to talk to whoever I see reading a book. If I'm on the subway and somebody's reading a book that's one of the National Book Award winners or a book that I've loved or a book that I want to read, I'm going to start talking to them, and I do. I think that's been the ... I don't have a lot of assumptions about who's going to be excited about what I'm talking. So it's like, I could be talking to literally anyone and it's not like you look like a reader, it's like, you all look like readers. Everybody looks like a reader to me. So I'll just have that conversation. So it has been interesting because I have all these unexpected conversations, and it's usually when I'm a little bit bored, so it's like, I'll be doing errands or in a cab or on an aeroplane, and then you just start talking.

But it's like, I just think that every once in a while you meet somebody who's like, "I don't read." And you're like ... And then you just ask a few questions and you're like, "Oh, you are a reader. Here's what you should read or here's what you have recently read that's going to give me an indicator of how to flesh this conversation out." I think that there aren't any particularly interesting ones other than the Uber drivers, which is a thing where I end up stuck in traffic, and I'm like, "What are you reading?", or, "Where are you from?" Then we start talking about whatever country they're from or whatever thing they're interested in, and then I have recommendations. I've had good luck getting uber drivers to in car purchase books. So that's really interesting.

Nick Colangelo: I can see that.

Lisa Lucas: I also often like to hand-sell books in other people's bookstores, which everybody loves. So I'll be in the bookstore, somebody's just browsing and then the staff is just watching me walk the person around the bookstore and be like, "You should get this and this and that." I should have been a book seller.

Nick Colangelo: I understand since you brought up bookstores, I'm one who is not a shopper, I'm a buyer. So if I need something I go there. The only exception is in bookstores. There's something about just browsing around, touching the stuff, looking up and down. Talk a little bit about bookstores and how you're in a bookstore.

Lisa Lucas: Sure. I mean, I think it's impossible. My mother is a great reader, but she's also a great lover of the book as object, right? She just loves having ... She may never

read half of them, more than half of the books that she has, right, they're just there, and that's because they smell great, and they look great, and you can pop in and pop out, and they're wonderful. I feel like a bookstore is just like a candy shop for me. I don't really like candy that much, but I do like books.

You walk in ... and yesterday I was in Prairie Lights, which I've never been too, I was very excited to go, and we were walking around and just going through all the books, have you read this, have you read that? Oh, this one is very good. Oh, this is so timely. It's almost like a visit with your friends and then like a party where you might meet some new friends or maybe a new boyfriend or whatever. It's like, it's just exciting. There's all these experiences to be had. I have this feeling sometimes when I look at a book and it's beautiful and it's about something that I'm interested in where I'm just like, I just want to eat the book and have it inside of me. It's like, obviously I may need 14 hours to read it and to actually have that happen. There's just so much promise in a bookstore. I'm very rarely unhappy when I finish a book or when I read a book, almost never. There's like one book that I'll never say out loud that I regret deeply having read.

Nick Colangelo: Can you spell it?

Lisa Lucas: No. I'll never say.

Nick Colangelo: You made a comment, I read that when you read a book it helps to reach some people who are really different from you. Today's world, society, just seems like we have so many ways that were divided rather than connected. Talk a bit about how you think books can sort of cross some of this divide among people.

Lisa Lucas: Sure. This is maybe seems not relevant, but so there was like a study which was that black women receive less pain medication in the hospital than other patients do, right, because the perception of pain that's about, "Well, you you seem tough. I have this idea of who you are." So you don't need more pain medicine to endure whatever you're enduring, because you're a different than me, and that's how I understand you.

I think that on a really basic level you read a book about a person who's experiencing pain or joy or boredom or any feeling, and it's framed for you, that person is real. If the writers done their job well, then that person feels like a real person to you, and it's like having a conversation with a person you never have a conversation with. When you do have a conversation with somebody who's totally different from how you expect, right, you feel very differently. You're like, "Wow, I was talking to this person, and they're a brain surgeon. I didn't know brain surgeons were like that." Then you have this richer understanding of what this person that you think is going to be mean or introverted or whatever your impressions might have been before you actually engage with them. I think books do that.

So it's like, on the fiction and poetry level, I think that you have this way into another person's human experience. But then I think also, the moment that we're in, I mean, I think would indicate that we have a very low understanding of civics. We have a very low understanding of history. We have a very low understanding of the regional political differences that exist within the country, and that we're not thinking about what that's really like. I think that nonfiction in so many different ways, whether it's creative nonfiction or it's history or biography or whatever it is, politics, just enlighten us. You know what I mean? There's just an information problem where we just aren't drawing the links.

I mean, even this week you're hearing everybody talk about Kaepernick and taking a knee. It's just like, you don't have the framework if you're just looking on Twitter and you haven't thought about Muhammad Ali, and you haven't thought about activism amongst athletes, and you haven't thought about the public reception of how athletes are received and you can watch who are politically active, which is not always very good. Ta-Nehisi Coates was actually tweeting [inaudible 00:19:34], and he was like, "Everybody's out here acting like Muhammad Ali was polling at 80% when he took a stand against Vietnam, and he legitimately wasn't." These are the things that are contextualised for us so that we're not just working in this bubble.

Now is not always, and if we look at now like it's always, then we're going to keep making the same mistakes that we made years beforehand over and over again and we don't move forward. So I think that you have ... just engaging with human beings on a better level is enriched by your reading practise. I think that your understanding of the place that we inhabit in the larger frame of history is articulated through a reading practise. I just think that, also, souls need balm, and I think that books do that too.

Nick Colangelo: It's a great statement that you can do so much by just reading and reading carefully that you don't always have to travel. You don't always have to have the means of other things. I mean, it's a great message. I've been going through the National Book Awards. It's a wonderful list, and it's like, "Oh, I need to read that." But there's another list out there that comes out every so often I want to ask you about, and that is the banned books list. What's your perspective about the idea of banning books? I mean, Huckleberry Finn is usually among that list, and there are some things ...

Lisa Lucas: Well, I don't think books should be banned. I think information should flow freely, but I do think that I'm always sort of impressed when books get banned, because I'm like, books are powerful. Right? We are reminded, when we have something that we know is important taken away from us, and then we fight back, and we rage against it, we are reminding ourselves how important it is to have that kind of free-flowing access to information. So I'm encouraged by sort of the fact that people continue on the banned books week, which is right now, and that we continue to make sure to insist that we don't have these kinds of restrictions in our lives, because we know that to be free, we have to be able to read freely and to have access to this information.

Nick Colangelo: My fantasy is that someday I will write a novel that is worthy of being banned, but until then ... That is so true that books are a means of freedom and if you take that away from ... As you said, often the banned books become even more powerful because then people want to have that. You talked about grandma and ma getting you to read. We have both parents and educators out of here. So I want to ask you, do you have any recommendations for how teachers or those about to enter the teaching profession can get kids to love reading even close to the way you feel about it?

Lisa Lucas: Well, I think that we focus so much on the lessons, right? We want to learn this thing. We want to know about ... I want to contextualise civil rights for you. I want to contextualise the frontier for you. I want to contextualise the Great Depression for you as a teacher, beyond just wanting kids to know how to read. But it's like, recognition is hugely important. I grew up and I didn't see anybody that looked like me in the books that I read. I saw historical figures who were great, but it's like, I wasn't like, "Maya Angelou, just like me," because it was 1992, and it just was a totally different time. So I think you have to seek out experiences that reflect back the lives that your students are living. That's not the only thing that students should read at all, but if you're asked to read K–12 books, right, and you never see anything that actually feels like your life. Well, forget it, why would you read Grapes of Wrath, because you're just like, all of this is boring and nonsense, and so once it gets really tough and I'm reading denser, more interesting texts, I'm going to just shy away from it. There's a book that was one of our finalists in the young people's literature category last year, which was Jason Reynolds' Ghost, which is the first in a Track series about a young man who has some trouble at home and he's having trouble in school and he becomes a part of a track team. It's just about sort of his life and really sort of feeling like he's a part and how to how to participate better in life. But I just remembered there was a scene in this book about a kid going into a corner store, like a candy shop, and getting a packet of sunflower seeds. I just remember going in the store and getting sunflower seeds and all the kids eating sunflower seeds, which I think might be a sort of cultural thing. But I mean, yes, thank you for actually just taking this little detail that reflects back my youth and sharing it with a bunch of children who might be having that same experience. It's such a dumb thing, what your favourite snack is, but if you don't see your snacks reflected back, if you don't see the clothes that you wear reflected back, the music you listen to reflected back, the language that you speak reflected back, you feel like you are not a part of this thing that you were being asked to participate in kindergarten and first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade. How long does it have to go on while you're just not acknowledged, you're not seen? So I think that the first thing is to make sure that you are seeking out really vigilantly experiences where your students and your children can feel seen. But I think also, choice, right? It's like, the assigning, the constant assigning of books and the complete absence of being able to say, "I want to read this, it's cool." If a kid is reading below grade level or a kid is a disengaged reader, let them read whatever. Twilight, god bless it. Do you know what I mean? I don't care what the book is. I don't care if it's got like some sassy bits in it. I don't care if there's some cussing. Just yes, read anything. If you like

it, read it, because it's like, if I can get somebody ... People are always scoffing at romance readers, right? Like, "Oh, romance is so different from literature." It's just like, those people are reading like seven romance titles a week. It's like, any person who can read through you need 1,500 pages of text in any given week and is so excited about it is my best friend, right? That's a reader. When blah blah blah book comes out and it's deeply romantic or there's some naughty bits in it, I want to be like, "You need to read this book," and now you're reading literature which is just a part of a holistic sort of cultural experience of the world. I don't care, read all the romance you want. I like that stuff too. I just read a book about ... I've been trying to read more broadly, and for me that means reading romance, but there's a lot of books about dukes and duchesses. I mean, it's fascinating, but I'm into. It's great. I like stories. We all like stories. I think that drawing those connections ... It works the same way for young people and for teachers. If you can just at fundamental level remind people that you are engaging in storytelling, you're reading a story, and it's not different whether it's this award-winning Caldecott or Newbery or Prints book or it's just something that tells you a cool story that you dig, it's valuable. It's just a value.

Nick Colangelo: That's really important, the whole thing about being engaged, because I do think some messages to kids, especially, this is kind of low level, you should be reading something different, so forth, which probably squelches the fact that I just want to read.

Lisa Lucas: How about comics?

Nick Colangelo: I know, yeah.

Lisa Lucas: I mean, give me a break. Kids love comics. You are reading stories. Also, when you're reading visually and you're actually reading words, I mean, your brain is firing, so don't shy away from that stuff. Last year the National Book Award winner for young people's literature was a graphic novel, it was March. You're telling kids to not read [inaudible 00:27:07] comics, and then all of a sudden there's this most credible civil-rights story told to you by John Lewis, and the messaging is, "Don't read comics"?

Nick Colangelo: Right. You've talked about the fact that when we do the National Book Awards, which I think are coming up in November, that this should be closer to the idea of the Emmys, the Tony Awards, something much flashier. Talk a bit about what your dream would be when they give out these literary awards.

Lisa Lucas: I think awards presentations in general, especially the higher level ones, Grammys, Tonys, Emmys, the Country Music Awards, they're places where we show out. That's what we do. We show out. We're proud of our industry, we're proud of our heroes, we're proud of the work that we do, we're proud to showcase that work, a year's worth of work, or more than ... in books cases it's often ... The composite work put into all the books that we recognise, probably like 70 years worth of work on one night. But I think that there is an element of the more you are willing to put into that Awards, the more you're willing to sort

of say, "This matters." That's part of it. Part of it is just saying, "We're here. This matters. This is what we are reflecting back to you about the world." So I'd love to see more people watching. I think that we came out of the trade associations, the Association of American publishers and the American Booksellers Association started us in 1950. Actually, earlier than that, but our history is very complicated. So there was a National Book Award in the 30s that then went away, because of World War II and then came back, but that's neither here nor there. For all those years the trade associations wanted a platform to sell the things, they were showcasing their wares. We broke away, became an independent nonprofit, but we retained that kind of trade spirit, right, where it was just like, we were mostly watched by people in publishing. We were mostly attended by people in publishing. That was our audience. Of course, the media would pick up who won the medallion, the little sticker that you see on the books, you see that in the store, but that was like, you didn't think about where the award was given or who it was given to, you just saw the sticker and said, "That's the thing that matters and I'm going to buy the book," maybe, or not. I want volume. I want sequins and tuxedos and fancy people. I just want it to be a thing that we're watching, like, "Oh, we came out for books. Let's see who's reading. Let's see what ... " I mean, I always joke, what are you wearing? I don't know if anybody will ever ask that question at the National Book Awards, but I would like it to be asked.

Nick Colangelo: Lisa, I've got a feeling we're not too far away from this fantasy coming out. Yeah. I'm sure you read multiple books at a time, and so forth. Are you one of these that if I started, I've got to finish it, or-

Lisa Lucas: No, I'm done with that.

Nick Colangelo: Thank you for saying that.

Lisa Lucas: No, you are absolved. If you hate it, keep on moving. It's the worst, who has time for this? I don't know how many years I have left on this earth, but I definitely don't have enough of time left to read a whole bunch of stuff that I can't stand.

Nick Colangelo: Yeah. Of books that you've read maybe in the last couple years, can you share one or two that have had significant impact on you this time?

Lisa Lucas: Sure. One is actually the National Book Award winner in nonfiction last year, which is called Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America by Ibram X. Kendi. I feel like it's this book that goes through a series of different texts and moments in American history that have really created, reinforced and doubled down on this idea of race, and how it impacts our lives, that have formalised that someone is less and someone is more, that things should be a particular way. I just think that as we look for books that help us to frame the world that we're living in, we converged culturally on Hillbilly Elegy, I think that book for me is the essential counterpart to that book. I think there was a lot of movement towards trying to understand rural white America,

as we have a president who's largely focused in that direction. But I think that that instinct to not really, again, holistically understand the issues that are at work in this country, and that a lot of these issues are not just about place, they're not just about what group you're a part of, but there are about the ideas that have been spread through books, through politics, through the government, through our conversations and how that changes the world for better or for worse, and in this case, for worse. Then it also talks about this idea of anti-racism, which is like, you're not combating a system, you're combating a way of thinking. I just thought it was ... He's an incredible historian. It's compulsively readable. I think that even as a person who's interested, as a black woman, in race, it just kind of exploded my brain. I think that everyone should read. It's like, my dream is that that book sells one to one a copy against Hillbilly Elegy. That would be like my best idea.

There's another book that I loved, mostly for its lyricism and just the unusual talent of the author, is that book called The Sport of Kings, which is by a woman named C.E. Morgan. I think that it's just a stunning, stunning book. It's ostensibly about horse racing, but it's not, so don't not read it because I said horse racing. I interviewed her, because I loved the book so much that the publisher was like, "You seem to really love this book, would you like to interview her?" But it's about justice. It's about cycles of poverty and cycles of wealth and just human behaviour. It's set in Kentucky, and it sort of follows this woman, this family that has a tonne of wealth and all of the families around this family that don't have a tonne of wealth. It also looks at kind of ... Again, back to the sort of that idea of race and how these ideas ... but it's like how ... I think she was trying to draw the analogue to sort of thoroughbred breeding is about making sure that you only breed winners with winners. If you think about race in the way that we've understood in America, that's about breeding winners with winners. I'm using air quotes for those listening. So that's how you keep everybody white on one side and black on one side and Latino on another side. It's like by actually saying we only want to breathe this way. It's not about cohabitation, because you're all living in the same place. But it's also just lyrical and gorgeous and melodramatic in a really controlled way, really, really, really a page-turner, like a Greek tragedy. It's insane. You'll see it and you'll be like, "It says, horse racing, and there's a horse on the cover, and it's 600 pages long, and I'm not going to read what Lisa told me to read," but I really want you to read it, because I feel like people definitely enjoy it. I read it like in two nights, and I don't read that quickly, it just was awesome. I stayed up until like 5 o'clock in the morning reading this book.

Nick Colangelo: I've got a feeling you just won over a number of readers for that 600 page book. Some day, and I hope it doesn't come for a long time, you are going to walk away from being executive director of the National Book Foundation. When that happens, what would you like to have people say about Lisa Lucas?

Lisa Lucas: Oh gosh. That's a tough question. That's the first time anybody's asked me when it stuck me. Yikes. Well, that I just did something for people, that I helped somebody to read a book and I helped somebody to get their kid to read a book

and that I helped an author get people to read their book, and then just that some of them mattered. I just hope it matters. I hope that some of the energy that I have and some of the work that I do changes a heart and a mind in a meaningful way. If one person is like, "You literally changed something for me because you introduced me to this book," that would be enough.

Nick Colangelo: Wonderful.

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Now we have an opportunity that Lisa is willing to take some questions from the audience. So if you have something you'd like to ask Lisa.

Speaker 4: Thank you, Lisa. I've really enjoyed hearing your thoughts. This may have been implied by what you've said, but I just want to ask it to [inaudible 00:37:11] it. It's kind of a political question. You alluded to the fact that in this country one of our problems is that we may not have enough information. My concern is that in addition to having information as people participating in democracy, we actually need to be able to think critically. My question would be, to what a sent the act of reading in itself in your view might create that?

Lisa Lucas: Well, I mean, I think that's about how the mind works, right? If you're reading something you're constantly trying to make sense of it. It's like, if the new idea is coming, you're thinking about it, and especially if you're talking about it. That's why I think book groups are really great and that communal act of reading is really great, because you're not usually reading in a vacuum, and it's a rare day that you anything that is interesting to you about a topic that you were interested in and then you just never say anything about it ever again. So it's like, the minute we get more information, we start to communicate that information as it has come to us, which is the act of critical thinking. It's the processing, it's the back-and-forth, it's the making sense of it, it's the being corrected or the correcting of something. So I think that it's just part and parcel to the enterprise of learning more. It's like, it's hard for somebody to actually be taking in information and to not be learning how to think critically about that information. Maybe that's not right, I don't know. I mean, I think it is the same thing and they are also two different things. I mean, we have to ... At school, right? School is a place where we create the tools to help us think critically throughout our lives, right? That's where we learn how to write about what we've read. That's where we learn how to debate about what we are learning. Hopefully, if we've done our jobs as educators and I used to do educational work back in the day, then people will take that with them. So I think maybe it's about reinforcing that open forum to discuss and debate ideas and to write about the ideas that we're thinking about and to have a place to talk about

them, so that when we move beyond our school years, that we are lifelong critical thinkers just like we are lifelong readers.

Speaker 4: Thanks.

Speaker 5: My question is, I don't know how much you're involved with the actual awarding process, but I'd like to know how that is done, that is, what criteria are used and what the process looks like?

Lisa Lucas: Sure. I stay very far outside of the actual judging. We start by having publishers nominate the books. The publishers will open up the process and all the publishers will send us books and [inaudible 00:39:51] we have our 1,500 books that are going to be under consideration for the National Book Award that year. That's four different categories, poetry, nonfiction, fiction and young people's literature. But then we appoint 20 judges, and that's five in each category, and one of those five judges is the chair. We give them the phone numbers of the past two chairs. We give them guidelines that are about making sure that we're equitable in how we look at the books. It doesn't matter if it's a best-seller or it has sold three copies, it does not matter. It doesn't matter whether the author is a jerk and is known to be a jerk. Is the book good? We do not say, "This is how you tell a good book from a bad one." We let each of those panels to themselves to decide and to figure out how to make their way through those books. They meet and talk over the course of several months, six months probably, and we're constantly trying to push back the submissions process to give them more time. They give us a list of 10, that's our long list. Then they go back for another round of much deeper reading of those 10 books, and they come back to us with a list of five, which is our finalist list. Then we bring them to New York, because they're all over the country, they have lunch together, a lunch I'm glad I don't have to attend, and they decide who the winner is. That's the day of the National Book Awards. Then I sit there anxiously during the dinner. Then somebody gets up on stage it says, "This is the person who won the National Book Award," and I yelp alongside everyone else, because I had no idea. I think it's fun, because on some level we root along with them, everybody, the staff at the National Book Foundation, we're like, "Oh, this book is so great, I hope this book wins," or, "I hope this book doesn't win," or whatever. It's just like we get to be like everyone else.

Nick Colangelo: How do you choose the judges?

Speaker 5: Yeah, [crosstalk 00:41:48].

Lisa Lucas: Secret sauce. No, you want to make sure that idea of sort of inclusivity at the awards. How do we champion inclusivity of publishing? Well, you just make sure that people are at the table. If decision makers have historically been one thing, how do you make sure that decision makers are all things and that we're having really vibrant conversations about what literature is, what counts as literature, what kind of voice counts as literature. So I try to look who's working around the country, how many different styles ... Because it's not just about, is

somebody Latino or somebody LGBTQ, it's also about, what's their style? It's like, are you effectively removing anyone who's experimental from the jury pools, so that that work never sees a light? Are you excluding people who like more popular work? But then you have to think about region, you have to think, "Did everybody go to Yale?" Maybe you don't want. You want people who are ... Did everybody get an MFA? You don't necessarily want that. So you're working on so many different levels. But I also like nice people on our juries. I know that sounds stupid, but actually, look, you want people to be able to have a rigorous and loving conversation about what literature is. It's like, I just don't think that this is a venomous thing. I think that it's hard to make decisions, but I think that you want people to really feel like this is not about exclusion, this is about lifting up. So I try to pick ... I love the 20 judges, they're my first judges, so this year is the first time I've picked them, and I think they're extraordinary people. I think they have extraordinary minds, and I think they're from all over. I think they're all really different. They're all at different places in their careers. I think it is painful to not be able to hear their conversations, because I would really like to bug their homes, but I think that they are a really nice mix of all these different things that just come from so many different places. Everybody keeps ... Well, how do you promote inclusivity? For me, it's just like to be legitimately inclusive. There is no person, if you're a great reader, you're a thoughtful reader, you're a lover of literature and you have the chops, however you got those chops to do it, then I want you at the table. But everybody's always kind of like, "Well, what does that look like?" Well, that's one year. You can't look at the work that we're doing over one year, or the work that I'm doing over one year. You have to look over a big canvas. You have to look over five years. What does this look like, what do the last five years look like? What do the last 10 years look like? Then you see. I think [inaudible 00:44:23] then I'll see. I mean, on some level, it's not like I did this before and we're just redoing it. It's like, we'll see. It's very human. It's not algorithmic.

Speaker 5: Thank you.

Speaker 6: There're books, I don't know the definition really, but books that are considered classics. I would think part of that definition is they're a great window into the period of time that they were written and we learn about that. Another definition might be that the themes are as relevant today as they were then. So I was wondering if there is a book or a couple of books that have been written in the last 50 years that you think might be headed to be that.

Lisa Lucas: Sure. I'm surely there are. I mean, that's again one of those things where it's just like, I will preface whatever I say by saying that I'm probably wrong. I mean, it's just like, you never know what's going to be a classic, because you don't know what's going to happen. It's like, you don't know how time will change. I think Beloved and Toni Morrison's work, it's just ... I mean, she's a stunning writer. It's just, she pushes forward the medium. I think she's just an outstanding writer. So I think it's already, I think, Beloved is considered by many to be a classic. I love George Saunders short stories very, very much, and I think that he's just a really both warm-hearted and dark writer that I think communicates something about

the time that we live in. I think Infinite Jest, whether you like it or not, is another sort of form-pushing book, that when you think about fiction of this moment, when I think about what informed who I was when I was growing up, a young adult, I think that's a meaningful book. But it's really, I just think, so hard to say in the middle of things. I mean, there's a lot of talent, but what will resonate with people that have not yet been born, I couldn't say. I mean, we don't understand our time as we live it. I don't think we understand the '80s yet really properly. I mean, I think we're just still in our lives, and I think that it's just so hard to be critical about what defines a time when you're living it.

Speaker 7: Hi, Lisa. Welcome to Iowa City. You spent a lot of time talking about how to help young people become good readers. Can you talk a little bit about how we help our young people become good writers, the next generation of great writers?

Lisa Lucas: Teaching the making of art is a very hard thing, right? I think that the best thing you can do is to provide the inspiration. Why do so many young people want to become filmmakers? Because there's an extraordinary amount of exquisite film being made. You come up in a time of, whether you like him or not, Quentin Tarantino, and you come up in a time of all of these people who are doing really compelling work, and you think, "I want to be like that when I grow up." But there's two pieces to it. One, the work is very good, but two, the work is reaching people, right? I think that you have to provide that exposure. I think that that's part of it. When I did educational programmes at Tribeca, a lot of it was about inspiring young filmmakers, but very little of that work was about technical expertise, very little of that work was about training them to actually have ... We did do that work, but the real work, to me, was not about like how do you work this camera and what's a good camera angle, because if you get inspired to become a young filmmaker, you're going to go figure that out. You're going to learn about what schools do it. But I need to to light the spark. I want you to hear from people that do this work. I think part of it is making sure that it doesn't seem like magic. I think sometimes we look at a painting or we look at a film or we're going to novel or we look at anything, and we just think, "Wow, it's magic." It's just about being like, "Actually, no, it's not magic, and that person is not necessarily a super genius. It's work, it's craft. This is the road there. This is where this person went to school. This is where this person didn't go to school. This is where they failed." And to humanise our makers so that it doesn't feel like something that's so lofty and above us, so that it feels like something that we can participate in. I think that that's about privilege, too, right? For young filmmakers, it's like, so you grow up in a little posh town and there's a filmmaker that lives down the street and you know that being an AD is a job, you know that you can work a camera, you know what they did because they just were talking about it at dinner, how they got where they were going, because nobody springs forth like Athena from Zeus's brain as a fully realised artist, right? So it's like having access to knowing that there are steps to get there is really important. So I like, for me, to inspire young makers to focus less on the art and focus more on how that can happen and just showing the road. I think that publishing feels like this mysterious business and writing is like, well. how do you sit down and write 500 pages? If an author is like, "I wrote a novel," and

people are like, "Wow," because it doesn't feel like something that you can do, except sit down and write. It might not be a good novel. I cannot in good faith tell you that you will all be good novelists, but you could probably write a novel. I think kids need to know that.

Speaker 8: Hi, Lisa. Thank you so much for the talk today. [inaudible 00:50:26] I just wanted to ask you a question about relatability, that sort of neologism, and how do we encourage readers, whether young readers or adult readers, to look beyond the books that are only reflecting themselves, that are offering these sort of new looks, new experiences?

Lisa Lucas: Well, I think that there's a lot of people in this country that don't have access to books that reflect back their own experiences. So I say for those who do have an overwhelming number of books that are targeted towards them, then you have the issue of sort of how do you read across lines. Because as a young black reader I was trained from the jump to recognise other people's stories. I'm a broad reader, because it's like, in the absence of seeing yourself, there is nothing but seeing others, and then you learn how to value and to find yourself in other people's experiences. How do you get people who are on the page to look for others on the page? I think that's about the educator and the parent and the recommender, that's about making sure that the media doesn't just sort of say, "Well, our audience is this, so we're going to recommend that." It's about being a teacher and not saying, "Well, this is what our community looks like, so I'm only going to recommend that," and, "Why would they read that? That's for ..." I mean, the assumption, I think, we have to in every way that we possibly can start counteracting, in every single possible way that a book is for a specific person. Books are full of information about people in some way or another, about places, about the world that we live in, and that is for everyone. So I think the more you can reinforce and that you can live by that, the more that you can ... It's like dolls, right? You go into a store, and if you have kids that look one way, you buy a doll, that looks like them, but why, I don't know. I had all kinds of dolls. My dolls were multicoloured. Buy multicoloured dolls for kids. Buy multicoloured books for your children and teach them. It's very easy, I think, to just get used to everything, to the way that things are. I think that we all have to be really vigilant making sure that we keep pushing ourselves, because it's not even ... I mean, it is political, but it's not, it's just about like, don't you want the things in your house to look like the world that you live in, to look like the street that you walk down, to look like the TV shows on your ... In a perfect world, you want to recreate the real world, not the fake world.

Nick Colangelo: One more question.

Speaker 9: Maybe this is a good one to end on. I'd like to ask you about the sequins, because that is something that you and I share as a goal and a dream. I'm the founder of a community writing organisation, and I also want people to be talking about daily, what are you reading. The questions that are coming to our minds, first and foremost, are what are the great and beautiful ideas in your head and what are you discovering from the writings of other people. Iowa City

is a place where I think that's talked about a lot, but it would be wonderful to hear more about what's happening next for you in the National Book Award and some of the things that you're doing to make books more talked about and more exciting on sort of that level of everyday culture and media.

Lisa Lucas: Yeah. I mean, it's hard to quantify the work that we're doing. We have our programmes, right, so we do a programme called Book Up that is an after-school reading programme that goes for 24 weeks. We do that in Huntsville, Texas, we do that in Los Angeles, we do it in Detroit, we do it all over New York City. We started a programme called Book Rich environments initiative, which is a tricky name, but it's a partnership between HUD, the Department of Education, between Urban Libraries Council and the Campaign for Grade-Level reading. We pick up really high quality books from publishers that were willing to donate to us. We gave out 270,000 books to 36 different public housing authorities around the country, and they gave them out in all these different ways. At NYCHA, which is New York City's Housing Authority, we gave out 50,000 books, and we set up a whole gymnasium full of just beautiful little tables, where Madeleine was there and Judy Blume books were there and Jackie Woodson's Brown Girl Dreaming was there, and they were all these gorgeous books set up and kids just got bags, and they go shopping. That's a fun thing to do. It was like supermarket sweep. It was crazy. So that's something that we can do to provide access.

But in Houston, there's a tonne of section eight housing. So it's different from sort of like going into a building where you can just set up a gymnasium full of books. When people go in to do their super boring section eight housing voucher paperwork, there's books there. Come in and do your paperwork and we'll give you some books. You're sitting there with your kids, and they're reading through a cool picture book that's theirs now, and they got to pick from a whole different list of books that we provided. So that's another thing that we do.

We have public programmes, so we have a partnership with the Skirball where we bring people together to listen to the National Book Award winners and hang out in LA and get to see a cool programme. We take all 40 long listers down to the Miami Book Fair the day after the National Book Awards, which is brutal, and do a huge programme with them. So they're showcased. We're just trying to get out there and do things. I mean, I think that in the coming years, we just approved a strategic plan which is super boring to talk about, but I think you'll see over the next few years a lot of really big shifts in the kinds of national programming that we're doing and the kind of digital programming that we're doing. It's hard to talk about now, because none of it exists except in this sort of plan based paper, but I think that we're trying to do things that are more exciting and to be more participatory and to come up with clever ways.

I'm just really interested in the grey spaces, right? The places where people are being missed. Whatever way they're being missed, it's like, how do you do

something like really cool and exciting in a place that doesn't have a tonne of cool and exciting book programming? Let's go there.

Nick Colangelo: Lisa, I want to thank you for your energy, for the insights that you bring, and for the heart that you bring. You will get more people to read, but you will also get more people to love reading. As hosts of The Window, thank you for being here.

Lisa Lucas: Thank you for having me.

Nick Colangelo: The window is presented by the Connie Belin and Jacqueline Blank International Centre for gifted education and talent development, a part of the college of education at the University of Iowa. The Belin-Blank Centre is directed by Dr. Susan Assouline, The Window is produced by David Gould and Joshua Jacobs. Music for The Window was composed and performed by Daniel Gagleonie and John Rapson. Opinions expressed by guests on Window are their own and not necessarily those at the The Belin-Blank Centre or College of Education or the University of Iowa.