

KNOPF Q & A



A conversation with

GISH JEN

author of

THE RESISTERS

Q: Was there a particular event or idea that gave rise to *THE RESISTERS*? What made you set a novel in the future?

A: It is a truth universally acknowledged that a child about to enter college must be in want of advice. And it is a truth just as universally perceived that one's child will have none of it.

Every parent knows this. As for what I did, then, when my younger child began her freshman year – in a year when I was both hugely worried about the direction of our country, and hugely hopeful that the young would prove up to the task of changing it – that was to write *THE RESISTERS*. I did not sit down with the intention of giving advice. If I had any intention, it was to enjoy the freedom of my empty nest. For the first time in decades, after all, I had whole days in which to write; if you hear a certain buoyancy in this dystopia, that's me, dancing. But when a child leaves the house, she does not leave your thoughts. And so even as I danced, I found myself portraying a future world in which so many of our current challenges – from the erosion of democracy, to the acceleration of climate change, to the fanning of racism and xenophobia, to the booming of automation – have gone unmet. I might as well have been sagely reminding my daughter of the challenges that lie ahead for her generation – of what's at stake. Of what she ought to be strenuously preparing herself for.

Q: Has she heeded your reminder?

A: I don't think she saw the book as in any way related to her. She was one of my first readers, though, and loved it.

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Q: In other words, you've disguised your parenting.

A: Transformed it, I hope.

Q: I want to have a self-cleaning house like the one in your book.

A: There is unquestionably a certain amount of wish fulfillment going on.

Q: And the house talks, too. Really, it was practically a character, and often a charming one. I really looked forward to what I want to call its dialogue.

A: It was fascinating to write. The house took on a life of its own, like a real character. It was sometimes gnomic, sometimes funny, sometimes perceptive, sometimes evasive. Grant, the narrator of the book, suspects that there may be a human hand coding it at times but it's hard to tell.

Q: At the same time, the house is an extension of what you call Aunt Nettie. Is its charm part of your point? And what exactly is Aunt Nettie?

A: Consumer technology is designed to be appealing. I myself love the little noise my Roomba makes as it sets off to clean, for example, and I love my clean floors, too. And I can certainly see why people love Alexa and Siri. Technology may be monitoring us, Big Brother-style, but we're not aware of the data collection—only of the convenience.

As for Aunt Nettie, she might be thought of as neither the 4G network that currently supports our cell phones, nor the 5G network now being rolled out, but rather a future 8 or 9G network. This imagined network bundles the internet up into a kind of iBurrito with AI (artificial intelligence) and surveillance functions. So if a student complains to a friend about being cold on the way to class in the morning, for example, she might find that her parents have had a drone deliver a coat to her dorm room by lunch. As for whether it will be her style – if she's been using an AI shopping app like HowDoILook, yes. It will be perfect. Of course, there is a darker side to the surveillance, too.

Q: Can you say more about the world you have created here? For example, there are two classes of people, right? The Netted and the Surplus?

A: In this future world, some of the predictions people are now making about automation have come true: millions of people have been put out of work. And while society has adapted, the new society, unfortunately, is not one in which people enjoy tremendous leisure and spend their days making art. Instead, it is one in which jobs – real jobs especially, as opposed to gigs – are hoarded. The employed--working closely as they do with Aunt Nettie -- are called the Netted. The unemployed are called the Surplus. If the Surplus have a "job," that is to consume; automation is so efficient that there is often overproduction, which the Surplus must absorb. They must also heed Aunt Nettie in other ways if they are not to be deemed Problematic, with punishments ranging from having their communications cut off to being set to fend for themselves in ocean waves that have, thanks to climate change, become terrifyingly huge and wild.

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Q: There are racial and other differences between the Netted and the Surplus as well.

A: Yes. The Netted are almost all what the characters call AngelFair. The Surplus, on the other hand, are often, although not exclusively, Coppertoned.

Q: For example, your young Surplus heroine, Gwen, is Blasian.

A: Exactly. She is part black, part Asian and part white. The Surplus are also often OddBodied and OddGodded—Muslims, for example.

Q: And some people live on land but others do not.

A: Where climate change has brought so much flooding, only the Netted get to live on high, dry land. The Surplus mostly live on 3-D printed houseboats, on the water. They rope themselves together in rafts and live in fear of having their pontoons slashed by Aunt Nettie's Enforcers.

Q: It's kind of a new Jim Crow.

A: Yes. The Surplus receive minimal schooling. Their food is laced with what appear to be sedatives. There are suspicious gases-- people call them Emanations-- rising from their playing fields.

Q: Emanations that Gwen's mother, Eleanor, a lawyer, seeks to stop.

A: Before Ship'EmBack -- a government program that sent all immigrants packing-- Eleanor was an immigration lawyer. Now --never mind that her job has been taken away-- she is still hard at work. It's tricky as most suits are heard by AutoJudges, who make judgments based on biased code. All the same, she assembles a team and goes to battle. The Emanations are causing children to become Enfeebled--to lose use of their limbs. She is determined to stop this.

Q: The relationship between Eleanor and Grant and their daughter Gwen is so beautifully rendered--even in the midst of this harsh future reality. Would it be fair to say The Resisters is in some ways a love story about parenthood?

A: Yes. We read so many novels about romantic love-- and let me say that THE RESISTERS does have a love story in it, too.

But extraordinary as Eleanor and Grant's circumstances are—and extraordinary as Eleanor and Grant are as people--they are also garden-variety parents who will do anything for their daughter. And their love for Gwen--their determination to see her blossom as she should—finally drives the story.

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Q: Baseball is a big part of this novel. Why did you decide to write about baseball? And how do you know so much about pitching??

A: I grew up surrounded by baseball nuts. My parents were Chinese immigrants, and my mother especially was fascinated by baseball. For her as for so many newcomers, it was an important way of participating in America, of feeling like an American. She did not need to be told it was the American game. You were American if you went to a game; you were American if you cheered. And you learned a lot about American values while you were there. The idea that a playing field should be level is embedded in baseball. So is the idea that everyone should have a chance at bat.

Right now the American dream is struggling. And yet part of us, I think, still believes that somewhere in a sandlot, unbeknownst to anyone, there is a kid who can knock that ball right out of the park. Baseball reminds us of our core belief in equality of opportunity. It reminds us of our belief that birth and privilege shouldn't matter, that sheer god-given ability should have its day. It reminds us of our commitment to possibility.

So when it came to a metaphor for what's at stake in America today, it was natural enough to think about baseball. Conveniently, too, my brother was a Little League pitcher. I had a lot of studying up to do for this book, but I wasn't starting from zero.

Q: Baseball is not currently an Olympic sport as it is in your novel, but it will be part of the summer Olympics in 2020. Is that a coincidence?

A: Yes. It is a (most happy!) coincidence.

Q: I am fascinated by the knitting. Can you talk a little about this thread that runs through the novel?

A: I loved to knit when I was younger and have always been fascinated by what a quiet act of resistance it can be. In my book, knitting is a way of laying claim to an identity not given to the Surplus. Gwen does some guerilla knitting with her friends, for example—making sweaters big enough for whole houseboats. But in real life as well, it can be a socially acceptable way of making a little space for yourself. I once sat next to John Updike's wife during a reading and was amused to watch her knit the whole time. She was making socks for his golf clubs.

Q: You dedicate this book to “all the Eleanors I know.” Who are the Eleanors?

A: They are all the women who, like Eleanor, fight the good fight--who keep the faith, and resist.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

Gabrielle Brooks / gbrooks@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2152

Demetris Papadimitropoulos / dpapadimitropoulos@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2799