



## *Katherine Nouri Hughes*

### **160: The Truth of the Matter**

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at [diymfa.com/160](http://diymfa.com/160) because it's Episode 160. Also, DIY MFA Radio is brought to you by our amazing fans and supporters on Patreon. So, if you'd like to become a patron and help support the show, hop on over to [patreon.com/diymfa](http://patreon.com/diymfa).

Today's interview features an author who is publishing her debut at the age of 67. And her novel is a remarkable fit, both in terms of the scope of it and the depth. Katherine Nouri Hughes is an Iraqi-Irish author, and she's an expert in diverse subjects. She earned her Master's Degree in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University, and oh, by the way, she's now on the department's Advisory Council.

She's also published two books on K-12 education, so she knows a lot about education. She has worked as a communications executive, both in the for-profit and non-profit sector. So, she kind of has been in a lot of different fields and draws from a broad experience. She's also served on numerous boards, including that of American University in Cairo, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and WNET/13, which is a public television station.

Today, we're going to be talking about her debut novel, which is *The Mapmaker's Daughter*. It's a historical novel set during the Ottoman Empire. And OMG, it is so juicy. I cannot wait to talk about it with her. Welcome, Katherine. It is wonderful to have you on the show.

**Katherine Nouri Hughes:** Thank you, Gabriela. It's very good to be here, and I love the word "juicy."

**GP:** [laughs] I do too. I tend to overuse it. I hope I don't do it too much.

**KNH:** That's okay.

**GP:** Let's start off by talking about the story behind the story, because let's face it, *The Mapmaker's Daughter* is one heck of a story. Why did you choose this particular character, this particular time period? It's not exactly the typical historical landscape, as it were. What drew you to this time and place?

**KNH:** The Ottoman Empire is at least as interesting as any other of the Great East-West empires. It lasted for 600 years from 1299 to 1923. The apex of Ottoman power was in the middle of the 16th century. That is the moment in which my novel is set. I was interested to know what caused the empire and the dynasty to reach the height of its power then, what caused the decline, and who was involved?

How I came to all of this specifically, was through one of my teachers, professors at Princeton, Bernard Lewis, who, partly because I didn't go to college until I was older, became a very good friend



of mine. I was working in a communications company, in a not-for-profit communications job. He suggested that I peel off and write this novel. He incredibly suggested that we do it together, which I realized maybe even only recently that he did as a way of luring me into this.

[laughter]

**KNH:** I mean to go unbidden into the project of writing fiction is extremely daunting. I think maybe he sensed this. He drew me in, he said he would help me with the research, because I do not read Turkish; and that's how I got going on it.

**GP:** That's kind of awesome that he kind of lured you into the writing of fiction, which is interesting because for some writers, it doesn't take a whole lot of luring, right? A lot of writers have been doing it for as long as they can remember. At least, that's been my experience. I started writing basically as early as when I could hold a pencil, so for me, it's never been a question of being lured into it. But I could see how, if you've never really been in that world or really thought, "Oh yeah, I could write a book," that that could be a very daunting prospect.

That's kind of awesome that your professor saw that and was able to redirect you in that way, and kind of draw you in. So, at some point, you must have realized that he wasn't going to write the book with you. What happened at that point?

**KNH:** Well, I realized it explicitly because he told me he was going to bail out. This is about two years into my research. It really threw me for a loop, and it caused me—I mean, and I wasn't young when this happened either. I suppose I started researching it when I was 47. I was maybe 49 or 50 when he said he was going to remove my training wheels and I was going to do this on my own. I think it really caused me to think about everything I had been doing and think about this character in a completely different way. I should throw in at this point, that I have been writing all my adult life. I mean, I made my living as a writer, but primarily a ghostwriter.

You know, I know how to be a ventriloquist, but I did not know how to tell this story. It was when Bernard launched me on my own that I began to realize that I needed to find the story inside of this woman, the story inside of this, actually scant facts of her life that were available, which of course is what makes her a really good subject for fiction because the less you know about somebody, the more you can make up. So, that's what happened when my professor backed off and pulled back the string on the bow, and let me go.

**GP:** It's interesting how you phrased it, that you could be a ventriloquist, but you didn't know how to tell a story. So, at some point, you must have started figuring out how the story got put together. What were some of the breadcrumbs that you followed that helped you piece together? Because let's face it, this book's got a lot of moving parts to it. There's a lot going on both in terms of the richness of the setting, the time period, even though you said that it's no less of an empire than any of the other great empires we hear about in history books.

But, you know, in the Western world, the Ottoman Empire isn't exactly a core, an area of profound study for most high school students, let's say. It's not exactly a part of history that is salient to a lot of readers. Obviously, you had to do a lot of research. How did you start putting those pieces together to make this story all kind of click into place?

**KNH:** Let me put it this way, Gabriela. I started by telling the story chronologically. I mean, that's the only way I knew to go about it. It took maybe a year to get a first draft down that basically went from



the beginning of her life to the end. I gave it to a smart person to read and they said, “Well, this is interesting, but it certainly isn’t a novel,” which was news to me. I thought I’d written a novel. I had to start all over again.

Version Two wasn’t a whole lot closer to being a novel than Version One. At some point, I went back to the— At some point of discouragement, I went back to the encyclopedia of Islam to reread entries on the main characters. I read something that I clearly had read earlier, but had not taken on board and this was the key, I realized, to the story.

I will pause and just let you know that the main characters in the story are a woman, who came to be known as Nurbanu, but she was born Cecilia Baffo Veniero. She was Venetian by origin. She was patrician, and she was illegitimate. She was captured when she was 12 by the Turkish corsairs Barbarossa. She was taken to Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire put into the Harem. In time, and not after much time, she was noticed by the Sultan himself, Suleiman the Magnificent, who was the greatest of all Ottoman Sultans. In 600 years, he was the best and the greatest. He entrusted her with a responsibility eventually, that was essential to the security and the duration of the empire, but it was an absolutely horrendous responsibility.

And it has to do with the Law of Fratricide. And the entry in the Encyclopaedia of Islam said that when the order to kill the brothers of this woman’s son, this would be where the Law of Fratricide kicked in on her experience. Her son refused to give the order; somebody else did. The Encyclopaedia of Islam did not say who. So, I thought, who would have the authority to give this awful order? Why would the Sultan have listened to whoever that person was? I hope I’m not being too convoluted here, Gabriela.

**GP:** No, no, that makes total sense.

**KNH:** Okay. That’s where the— It was absolutely clear to me that that is where the story would issue from. And especially since it actually is a mystery in history, nobody knows who gave the order to have the young brothers of Nurbanu’s son executed when he was about to take the throne. So, I cooked up who did it and why, and that is the story.

**GP:** That, I mean, is chilling. It’s really, really chilling to think about that. And as a mom myself, that is just heart-wrenching, but at the same time, it’s fascinating. I think that’s what really drew me into this character is this idea that she has some very dark things involved in her life. I mean, even at the beginning of her life, there’s a lot of bad stuff that happens right at the get-go. But yet, there’s a push and a pull, right? Like, she’s not an all-bad.

**KNH:** She’s not at all all bad. In fact, she’s essentially good. I suppose you could say that one of the points of the story is that—I mean, I think we all know this: good people can do bad things. And so what’s interesting is why they do, what happens, what are the series of choices and thoughts that—This was a woman with a really well-functioning moral compass; and what happened to that compass at the moment of truth, and why?

It’s really a story, also, it has a lot to do with trust, which is a big issue for me in life. Except for love, I’m not sure there’s anything as important as trust. And so her trustworthiness and where that derived from, which was principally her mom, the map maker, her trustworthiness is what caused Suleiman the Magnificent to notice her as a girl, when she was brought into the Harem. She was only 12, and something besides her beauty, and she was beautiful. Something besides her beauty and her patrician allure caused him to pay attention to her, and in time, in a fairly short order, trust her. That’s an important dynamic in the book is where trust comes from, what we do with it, how it’s abused.



**GP:** What I'm loving about this— And so, let's tease out a few things from what you just said. One of the things that I caught, as you were saying that, is this idea of kind of pinpointing the big issues that are big for us as humans, as writers, but humans also. So, for you, you mentioned love and trust. I mean, for me also, trust is a huge, huge issue. I mean, it's actually kind of almost a running joke that—You know, the movie *Meet the Parents* with *The Circle of Trust* and Robert De Niro is constantly doing that whole "I'm watching you in *Circle of Trust* thing?" Like, I just grew up in a family where that was the mindset, and it's my family. Like, that was the *Circle of Trust*. It took a long time.

My husband jokes that he kind of knew that when he and I got engaged, he was finally accepted into the circle of trust, but it took a very long time for him to feel like, like several years, for him to feel like he was actually in that circle of trust. So for me, that was, knowing that about yourself, but then being able to put that into the story is, I think, something that a lot of writers can tap into.

**KNH:** Yeah. It's hard to do because—Well, you know very well, Gabriela, that a lot of what makes a novel any good at all is what is shown rather than what is told. Boy, that was really on the job training for me because, as a speech writer and as a ghost writer, I was much more skilled in telling than showing. And communicate these big themes, like how trust works about—here's another main theme of the novel, about the important of telling oneself the truth—getting this across without saying it explicitly—

I'm not sure I could have done it in less than the many years that it took me; in fewer than the many completely different drafts that I wrote. A better and greater writer I'm sure could have, but I couldn't. I had to kind of learn my way there. It's not irrelevant that my own life and my own self changed a lot over the course of writing this book, because it took 20 years. I mean, it's wild—I mean, not 20 whole years, but I started it when I was 47, and it's now 20 years later and my life has changed a very great deal in that time and so have I. I feel that all of that has helped me to write in a way that is illustrative rather than explicit.

**GP:** So, as you were—I mean, as you mentioned, you learned a lot of this on the job and you picked it up, I'm sure, based on instinct and also based on having people say, "Hey, look, this is working, that's not working." You know, kind of the way most writers learn where we write something, and then someone gives us feedback, and then we work on it again. But at some point, you probably started seeing patterns and started noticing, "Oh, when I do this, that kind of shows more than tells or whatever." I'm guessing that that's the case. Did you at any point—Do you have any sort of things that you learned that you were able to then sort of hold onto through the novel and apply multiple times?

**KNH:** I'm going to answer that by telling you two pieces of advice that were given to me in the very beginning by a good friend of mine, who will probably be known to your listeners, and that's Richard Ford. He said, as I was launching into this, he said, "Pay special attention to two things. One is proportion. And two, when you get stuck in a certain way and you'll find what gets you stuck—when you get stuck, you will find a solution for getting unstuck and you will keep using that solution, be aware of the solution."

Two things to say about this; I had no clue what he meant by proportion. And I thought, "Oh man, I wonder what the solution I'm going to need to abandon is." I did learn because he told me to be on the lookout. I paid close attention to what might be an issue of proportion. In this case, it's kind of obviously, had to do with history versus fiction. You know, the raw facts versus what I made up and inferred from those facts, and ascribed to the characters; the proportion between telling and showing.

The proportion also, and this is one of the hardest things to do with the book, between the backstory—well, actually, there are three frames of time; the backstory and the more forward story and then the third



arc of time is in the present because this is told as an end of life memoir about—I can say more about that in a second—but the proportion of timeframes, how to make the backstory work; it was incredibly complicated. I had considerable help from editors along the way, whom I, you know, hired guns—

[laughter]

**KNH:** —whom I would bring in to help haul me out of the trench of failure and rejection slips. There were many of those. I would like to say to your listeners, don't be afraid of the rejection slips because they're forms of propulsion, they really are. I hated to see them. I hated that they existed, but I never—Those rejections never made me think the book couldn't or wouldn't happen. I never knew quite know why I felt that. Probably my husband had a lot to do with it, but—I've wandered off, but that's partly about proportion. The sticky, wicket—Well, the solution that I kept applying to, when I would get stuck and not know how to propel a scene, I would lapse—and that's the only word I can use—I would lapse into dialogue. [laughs] It was always contrived, and it always sounded like applied after the thought.

It was very good advice from Richard Ford to beware of the solution. When I was done with whatever draft it was, I probably removed about three-quarters of the dialogue.

**GP:** Wow. What I love about that— Let's unpack that again. Let's start with the proportion piece, because I feel like both of those pieces, there's so much that we can mine from that. The proportion piece, I think is interesting because different books, different writers writing different books are going to have to grapple with proportion in different ways.

You mentioned that for this particular project, the two main sort of places where the proportions could get out of whack are either with the truth versus fiction, or truth versus, like, facts versus Truth; with the capital T. And kind of finding that balance between what's factually real versus what's really telling the heart of the truth in the story. But for other writers, that might be different. Like, if you're not writing a story that's based in history or based on a true character, then it's not so much the truth versus fiction, but maybe it has to do with other elements of proportion.

The other piece that I thought was interesting was the proportion of the different narratives, because for a lot of writers, even if we're not working on multiple points of view or multiple timelines, there's usually going to be certain, like, multiple threads of something in our story that we have to juggle, whether it's important characters that we have to keep track of or important thematic elements that we have to keep track of.

So, I wanted to get a sense from you, what did you do to keep track of what was happening in those three different timelines and then be able to assemble them into something that worked?

**KNH:** I wish I could give you a really helpful answer to that, because I didn't come up with a device. I had endless timelines that I had on a huge bulletin board in front of me. I could always keep straight the timeline starting with the year of her birth, 1525, and going to 1583 when she died. I had to include what was going on in the rest of Europe and the world and in different categories, whether it was navigation or commerce, or, you know, what was happening in the world of Islam, and so on. So, I had that all, literally, in front of me on a bulletin board.

The absolute hardest thing for me to handle in this book was the making work of these, as you've just articulated, of the two arcs; the big one of the arc of her life, the little one of the four-week arc that she's lying there on her sickbed telling the story. It mainly had to do with her awareness in the



short arc, the four-week arc of lying there, getting sicker and sicker; her awareness, her increasing awareness of the things that had been going on in the long arc that she hadn't understood at the time as they were happening. I mean, how did I make it work? Honestly, I can't even tell you. It's just, I knew what needed my closest attention. I knew where I was going to fall down.

**GP:** Like, you knew what would make or break the story.

**KNH:** Yeah. I mean, I knew that this was the dynamic. Yes, exactly. If I could make this work, then I was quite certain, that her story, of which I first told just as a series of events by year, that her story actually would emerge and become a story. I think I did make those two arcs work together.

It's where they join; at the very end of the book and of what we might think is the end of her life, or imagine, is going to be, but who knows; it's where they join that she understands the truth of her life, including the reasons she made the choices she did, the consequences of those choices. It's where the arcs join that she recognizes and can say out loud to herself—that is to the parchment on which she's scribbling her thoughts—that she can say, "I have done enormous harm to the people I love most. How could I have done that? Why didn't I see? What made me do it? Is there anything to be done about it now?"

You know, these are real basic questions that older people ask themselves. You know, there was a third arc, Gabriela, and that's the arc of my own life, let's just call it 20 years of writing this thing. When I started on it, I was fairly early on into a perfectly wonderful marriage. The births of my two grandchildren occurred over the course of these years. They're now 17 and 14.

**GP:** Wow.

**KNH:** I couldn't have written about the grandson in the book, I really don't think I could have, without having experienced what it is to become a grandmother, which is one of the very best things that ever happened to me. I was doing ghost writing at the same time.

Then the other event that dwarfs all others is that my husband died, not all that long ago. And that absolutely changed what I was able to say about truth-telling. And especially the end of the book, couldn't have written it otherwise. Well, I mean, I tried to, but, you know, earlier versions were attempts at the truth and the final version, you know, the final version was the truth itself because of what had happened in my own life.

**GP:** That's amazing. I mean, honestly, like I'm getting chills here hearing you talk about that because—I think there's something—This ties back to what you were mentioning earlier about the fact that it took you a long time to write it. And it's also a book you've written later in life, you started this at what? 47. And it took you 20 years to write it. It's not like you were straight out of college writing your great American Novel, you know? I think there's something about the maturity, right? Like, that you've had these experiences.

**KNH:** Absolutely.

**GP:** I don't know. Do you think you would've been able to write Nurbanu, at the end of her life, if you hadn't had these experiences?

**KNH:** No, I do not. I absolutely do—I know I wouldn't have been able to. I would've been making it up instead of writing what I know to be true. Now, a more experienced better writer could make it





up effectively, but I couldn't have. I tried in the earlier drafts. I cringe when I look at them sometimes because it was so effortful. [laughs] You know, it's great getting older; it really is. It frees you up. You're hung up on fewer things, afraid of fewer things.

**GP:** Do you think you've become more daring?

**KNH:** Yes.

**GP:** That's really cool. I love that. I think it's fascinating to me also, like, figuring out—So, going back to the craft of it, and so like you had to mine this life experience—It's not so much the sort of logistical experience, but what you're talking about, the emotional truth. You experience these things, like the birth of your grandchildren, your husband's death and these things then seeped into you and seeped into the story and then came out in a different way, but played out in the story.

**KNH:** Except I would propose a different verb, Gabriela, and it's something other than "seep." [laughs] It was more tsunami-esque.

**GP:** Ah. [laughs] So, what's the word? Floodgates opened. [laughs]

**KNH:** There you go.

**GP:** So, the other thing that we were talking about was that being aware of the solution. But before we get to that, I wanted to highlight for our listeners that, the key message, I think, obviously, everybody's experience writing their book is going to be different. And as you've said, Kate, it's not some writers might be able to make that up convincingly, but the fact that you knew the thing that could make or break the story and that you paid attention. You held onto that throughout the writing process, meant that you—Like, I firmly believe that when we put our focus on one thing, it's kind of like, we can do anything as humans.

**KNH:** Yes. That's a good point. That's right.

**GP:** Having that point of focus and knowing the right thing to focus on, because I think some writers get hung up on the wrong thing and then they don't actually focus on the thing that really makes the difference in their book.

**KNH:** That is an excellent point. I wouldn't have thought to put it that way, but I couldn't agree with you more.

**GP:** Do you have any advice for writers as to, like—I mean, obviously it's different. For different books, different writers, it's going to be a different thing that needs to be attention, but did you have sort of a emotional barometer that told you that this was the thing you really needed to watch for? What told you that that was the thing you needed to hold onto?

**KNH:** Well, if I'm understanding you correctly the thing that guided me was this reference in the Encyclopaedia of Islam about this mystery of who gave the order to kill, to execute the boys when Nurbanu's son takes the throne. That was the event that I kept in front of me all the time, the ghastliness of it. And you know, what the human response to its horribleness would be. I guess, you know, the emotional part is— I'm not sure this is an answer to your question, but I think it's extremely important to relax and be calm and not strive. Because in the beginning, the first couple of drafts, I was striving; and it showed. It's not too mysterious when you calm down, and you have interesting material and interesting characters—I'm sure all your listeners know this, the characters emerge if you just let them. They merge and emerge.



I cannot tell you—I don't want to creep anybody out, but I can't tell you how merged I feel with Nurbanu. When I would talk to my husband about her, I would always refer to her in the first person. [laughs] It's not irrelevant that her name is actually my own name, Nurbanu, Nur means light in Turkish, and my maiden name Nori light in Arabic, but just allowing for that merging and then the slow emerging, be patient. So, here, fellow writers: be patient, try not to be afraid, never ever give up. Don't give up ever.

**GP:** I think the piece for me that really resonates from what you were saying was that idea of being calm and being still because as writers, I think, oftentimes— I don't know. I mean, people can probably tell from the way I talk on this show and the way I just am in general, when they see me, if they see me at a conference that I have a hard time being still. For me, I find that motion, whether it's like the wheels turning in my head or it's physical motion or it's sort of connecting with people and socializing kind of motion, that's usually something, that kind of busy-work, that keeps me from really paying attention to the thing that I need to pay attention to.

So, what I've learned and what you were saying that really resonated with me is it's the moments when I force myself to be calm and just sit with the thing, whether it's the book I'm trying to write or the article or the course I'm building for DIY MFA, and just sit with it. It's in that moment that I then realize, "Okay, this is the piece of it that really needs the most attention." It, kind of, rises to the top. It's like the more we try to force it, we slam it down. We, kind of, cover it up, and we don't give ourselves room to actually see the project.

**KNH:** That's right. And maybe sort of a coefficient to that would be, or a byproduct of it, is to be aware— I think when you're calm, you can be more aware of the world around you, and I do mean in your everyday life. And you notice more. You notice more, and you notice better.

You will find that there is applicability to what you're writing, of the things that you are noticing, whether it's the behavior of people around you, a gesture that you see in the subway, making sense of the way your children or grandchildren are behaving. You just notice different and better, and then you can— You can apply it, and you're applying the truth; just layers and layers of truth.

**GP:** I love that. I think that that ties beautifully with the second piece of advice that your friend gave you, the piece about, sort of, "beware the solution." And that I think ties, that really resonated with me because at DIY MFA, one of the things that I teach a lot of the times isn't just so much the writing practice, but also being able to step back and look at your process and figure out, "Okay, is this really working for me or not?" And then making adjustments to your process and to how you're tackling the act of writing.

I think that a lot of times you're—You know, you're totally right. We find a solution that works, like, why do we need to reinvent the wheel? And then we start to lean on it, like a crutch. So, I thought that was just such a great, great point.

**KNH:** Yeah, because, you know, the solution to one thing is, by no means applicable to something else. I mean, that's pretty the obvious, but it's amazing how you get blind to that fact.

**GP:** Also, I think it becomes safe, right? We know, "Okay, I'm going to dialogue—" We don't even notice we're doing it. We just kind of, we hit the wall on something so we rely on the thing that's going to come more easily.

**KNH:** That's right. It's familiar.





**GP:** Exactly. And so I think that, again, is sort of having that awareness of what you said and being able to step back and say, “Oh, whoa, I’m using dialogue or I’m using description or I’m using exposition or I’m using too many verbs or too many adverbs; and this is a crutch and how do I then kind of adjust my writing so that it’s not a crutch?”

**KNH:** I don’t know why this comes to mind right now, maybe it kind of feels like the abrase of this, something that is helpful. One of the most exciting undaunting things that happened in the process and kept happening at more and more, was seeing things in new ways around me. And maybe I just said this, but it was thrilling to realize that my widened perceptions in the present were going to widen the path I was trying to beat in my book, whether it’s Nurbanu’s path of the thought, or the path of the plot. When you realize how the two work and how your real life feeds into your writing life, it is just thrilling. And boy, does it keep you going, kept me going.

**GP:** You know, it’s fascinating that you say that because I’ve had many people mention that DIY MFA isn’t so much like a writing thing as it is like a mindset. In many ways, I mean, for me, it’s like, I think about that and I’m like, “Well, yeah, of course,” because I live and breathe this every day. Of course DIY MFA is my mindset. But then it’s interesting to see how a lot of the things that you are doing in your life actually end up influencing and opening things up in your writing. I love that you tapped into that.

So, let’s talk a little bit more about writing the book at this stage in your life. What were some of the— Can you give us some pros and cons? What were some of the advantages? I mean, we’ve already touched on that. Having the life experience, not just the events of your life, but the emotional experience, but what about some of the challenges?

**KNH:** [laughs] Well, I really hate to say this, but what’s the point of not being completely honest about it? My memory isn’t as good, and that drives me nuts. I think it’s true of most people my age—I mean, it’s not failing or anything, but—That’s a little bit harder to deal with. On the other hand, you know, it’s sort of a memory for certain kind of details: “Where did I read this?”

But my ability to make sense of the things that I have read is greater. I guess that’s the biggest thing. I can make more sense out of life because I have better tools all the time. I mean, look, being the parent of grown children, it’s a very particular thing in itself. That has taught me a lot.

**GP:** I mean, it’s interesting, as the parent of young children, but then the daughter of parents who have grown children, I also find that it’s interesting as a 30-something-year-old with small kids, I’m in a very different mindset than I was, say, in my 20s, straight out of college, newly married. It was a very different outlook on life, and very different attitude towards my parents and towards my own life as well.

**KNH:** Yes, these are all welcome developments, I think. That’s part of what’s good about being older is that I recognize them as welcome. You know, when I was your age, I probably didn’t feel that way. I’d also, this is also obvious, but I don’t have the stamina that I did even when I started this. But I made up for it and I make up for it in determination, which I guess is a kind of stamina. And to see that I actually could—You know, I couldn’t write as many hours a day, or sit still at the computer as many hours a day, but I was very much aware that my determination was kind of compensating forward, and that was a real upper realizing that it could work that way.

**GP:** I love it. I think it’s inspiring because a lot of people do come to writing later in their life either because they’ve been busy with other things like having families, or careers, or just because they’ve never quite had the time to focus in on their writing until later on. And so I think it’s important that,

you know, writing's one of those career trajectories that doesn't necessarily require sort of the energy and athleticism of youth. Like, you can do it at any age, essentially.

**KNH:** Absolutely.

**GP:** I think it's awesome.

**KNH:** It's hard for me not to think that it gets better as you get older. I mean, it has for me. I can't imagine life without writing, without the desire and the ability to express myself in words on paper, extremely clarifying and affirming. It doesn't have to be a novel. I just write all the time, little things. I bet your listeners do too. You know, it's a form of self-engagement.

**GP:** I do the same thing, I think on paper. I can't actually formulate a thought in my head until I pick up a pen and write it on a page. It's something like, it just clicks in my brain when I do that.

**KNH:** Yes. I mean, it's just wonderful to see words on paper. Actually, that comes up as a little mini theme in the book because Nurbanu, she studies calligraphy when she first comes into the Harem, and in a new language, Arabic. The shapes of letter and the shapes of words are really important and enticing. She saw that, and I see that, and you see that. It's one of the great things about writing.

**GP:** What's next for you? The book just came out. Do you have any new projects in the works? And if so, is it going to be similar in the same vein, or are you striking out into new territory?

**KNH:** The short answer is I'm not sure, but I think it would probably be something of a memoir or a fictionalized memoir, which is probably a really treacherous domain to wander into. But I think that's where I will go. More just really to continue the exercises, getting down to the bottom of things, you know? If I do that, and I think it's what I will do, it will help me have the same experience that Nurbanu did as she laid there for four weeks trying to make sense of her life. I think I would like to do the same with mine, and I hope with similar results, although I'm certainly not going to give away the ending of the book.

**GP:** [laughs] Yeah. I love how even after the book, you're still merged with this character. That's so cool.

**KNH:** I certainly am.

**GP:** I love that.

**KNH:** It's not going to go away.

[laughter]

**GP:** I always end every episode with the same question. What is your number one tip for writers?

**KNH:** Don't quit. Don't stop. Don't give up. "Quit" is a bad word. Don't give up. Don't be discouraged. And most of all, don't be afraid to stay at it, let the truth come up and it will just allow it to come to the surface, and there it'll be for you to work with.

**GP:** I love it. That is fantastic. And it ties so beautifully to everything we've discussed today. Thank you so much for being on the show today. This was so much fun.

**KNH:** It's been a great pleasure.

**GP:** All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

