

Gaslit Nation Transcript

14 September 2022

“THEY KNEW — The Gaslit Nation Interview”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/they-knew-gaslit-71935327>

[intro - theme music]

Sarah Kendzior (00:10):

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the best sellers, *The View from Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight* and of the new book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, which is out today, so you can go ahead and get that now.

Andrea Chalupa (00:28):

And I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, the film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see. And we know this because it keeps shutting down screenings.

Sarah Kendzior (00:42):

And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa (00:50):

And today we are joined by a very special guest, my co host, Sarah Kendzior, the author of her latest book, *They Knew*. [thunderstorm, rain and lightning SFX with howling wolf] This interview begins as a dark and stormy night. [mwahaha laugh SFX]

Andrea Chalupa (01:12):

This is the closest, Sarah, that you'll probably ever come to writing a Stephen King novel, only it's real and it's about American history.

Sarah Kendzior (01:24):

Yeah, I mean, my dream is for all of our predictions that we've made over the last four years together to be wrong and for the United States to, you know, turn into a true democracy and then I will actually write a fictional Stephen King-type novel. But yeah, for now unfortunately *Hiding in Plain Sight* and *They Knew* will have to suffice for that.

Andrea Chalupa (01:47):

Yeah. And so if you're into gothic ghost stories, if you're into travel journals, if you're into haunted American road trips, this is the book for you. It is a page turner. It is gripping and it's filled with real life monsters, which is a chilling reminder that throughout American history, Donald Trump has been the norm.

Sarah Kendzior (02:20):

Absolutely. When I started this book, it was around spring of 2021 which meant I had been writing for the public about Donald Trump for about six years. And I was incredibly sick of writing about Donald Trump. I was incredibly sick of explaining to everyone the things that we have been explaining on the show for a long time; his background of criminality, the cohort that surrounded him, the transnational aspect of it and just the sociopathic evil of it all. And then what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil”, the enablers, the people who just stand there and watch the cruelty and watch the suffering as a result of that cruelty and do nothing to stop it. That's at the heart of every horror story and I think grief is at the heart of every ghost story.

Sarah Kendzior (03:15):

So this is a sort of non-fiction ghost story about America. But when I started the book, it was really hard to get going because the last thing I wanted to do was write another Trump book. So I was stuck with this question of like, this is obviously on the forefront of people's minds, we're still contending with the same problems that we had when he was in office. It's not like any of this went away. We're haunted by it. So with the first chapter, which was excerpted in *Vanity Fair* last week and is actually going to be today's Patreon bonus. If you're a Patreon subscriber, you can listen to a large part of that first chapter.

Andrea Chalupa (03:52):

Gut wrenching. It's so disturbing. It's like you could sell that chapter to *American Horror Story's* Ryan Murphy.

Sarah Kendzior (04:03):

Oh, definitely.

Andrea Chalupa (04:03):

Or the *Black Mirror* folks.

Sarah Kendzior (04:05):

Yeah. It's the story of a man who lived in the 1920s and '30s, a con artist—a murderous con artist—very much like Trump. So without giving too much away, I tried to tell the story of Donald Trump and his rise without actually speaking about him directly until much later because that's the true horror of Trump is that he's not this singular figure. He's had predecessors and he will have successors. And he is the culmination of, I think, American political tendencies that have been there since the founding of this country, with truths and buried secrets that we've never really reckoned with and that we're reckoning with all at once right now. And so yeah, it ended up being a really weird book. You know, I remember telling you this as I was working on it because it was... It was difficult.

Sarah Kendzior (05:02):

There were some chapters that just sort of poured out of me, like the first one. I remember I wrote that and I thought, “My God, my editor is gonna kill me. Everyone is expecting *Hiding in Plain Sight 2* or whatever and here I am with this story about a haunted hotel in Northern Arkansas and this sort of freewheeling travel narrative.” But it came from the heart. It's a very 2021 book and I kept thinking about that. I kept thinking about how there's so little art from the period of the Spanish flu. When we were hit by COVID, everybody was taken by surprise. They didn't really know how to process a pandemic. And so I kept kind of looking into the past. You know, what did other great writers or artists or even filmmakers at that time have to say about it? And you really don't see a hell of a lot.

Sarah Kendzior (05:53):

It's an episode of history that people wanted to forget. And I couldn't figure that out because in 2020 it was, you know, it dominated everything. It was so singular. By 2021, I was like, "Yeah, I wanna forget this shit. I wanna forget that this ever happened. I don't wanna think about the trauma. I don't wanna think about the grief. I don't wanna think about the loss." But unfortunately I was contracted to write a second book, so I had to write something in the midst of that loss. And then I thought, you know, This is actually valuable. I wish there had been seminal books written in 1918 by somebody living in 1918 who would rather be living at another time and who would rather be writing about other subjects besides, say, World War I and the Spanish flu and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and the rise of white mob terrorist race riots and all these very similar things to our time that were happening then.

Sarah Kendzior (06:47):

So the book is kind of bracketed in that time. It's the story of 2021. You probably noticed from the author's note that the very last day I made edits was the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And I remember thinking, "My God. We're really reliving all of the worst moments of history and now I'm ending on this note" and I honestly didn't know what the world would be like by the time it came out or, honestly, if it would come out or if I would still be here when it came out. So it's, you know, it's been a nerve-wracking experience and I didn't wanna lie about that, but I also wanted to showcase it in a way that was more palatable for people. So there's a lot of lyrical writing, I guess. I mean, I feel weird talking about my own writing. Folks can just go and read it for themselves. But if you've read my other stuff, if you've read *View from Flyover Country* or *Hiding in Plain Sight*, it's more in the vein, I think, of *View from Flyover Country*.

Sarah Kendzior (07:42):

And I just kind of let loose. I really cut loose with this book which is why it's, I think, kind of a strange one. Hopefully a good one. Hopefully you'll like it. But it's true to my heart and I think that's the most important thing is that you tell the truth and that you also speak with sincerity and try to come from a pure place when you're writing a book about a time in which so many people are suffering.

Andrea Chalupa (08:07):

No, you were very much in the zeitgeist of the times of wilding out.

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs] Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

After the plague comes the wilding out. And that's wonderful but, you know, all of us have been through this collective hell, this collective trauma, and that brings this instant intimacy. We know from anybody we come across, it's just this shared recognition of when you say "hello, how do you do?" on the street or in a meeting, behind that is "We're going through hell, we're going through mass trauma. Let's all carry each other through it." And so you can very much just let loose now because people basically have a collective attitude of *Fuck it*. [laughs] And that's very much the spirit of this book and I'm so thrilled to see it. I would just say *View from Flyover Country* was your blues album, *Hiding in Plain Sight* was your death metal album—

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

And *They Knew* is your Vincent Price-narrated “Thriller” music video.

Sarah Kendzior (09:07):

[laughs] Yes, possibly. I have to say, it's so funny when I read reviews of my work because I get a lot of like, you know, “Oh, she's like a beat poet or a blues singer or a Gothic novelist” and I keep thinking about all the people who are constantly asking me for solutions. [laughs] And I'm like, “Do you ask the beat writer or the beat poet or like the blues singer or the Gothic novelist for political solutions? Is that really where that person's expertise lies? Or is that person's expertise more conveying the reality of the situation?” It's such a bizarre situation to be in, but yeah, the masks are off now, I think, in various ways. In 2021, it was such a strange year because it began with this note of timid optimism both about the Biden administration and also about the possibility that COVID was going to leave us.

Sarah Kendzior (10:00):

There was a lot of anticipation about the summer, you know, this being the summer that we finally sort of feel “normal” again, and then it was devastated. And as I point out in the book, the devastation, of course, was rooted in my state of Missouri, the bellwether of decline which produced the Delta variant and then that set off all the other variants. And that's why we're in the hell that we're in now. What happened after is just so much cruelty from so many different people and I think it's the result of trauma, so I try as much as I can to not judge people who are writing just really generalizing, demeaning things, blaming people in various parts of this country or cheering on death. If they thought at that point that somebody got COVID, they would blame them for it when it often was not that person's fault.

Sarah Kendzior(10:48):

It's just gruesome and disgusting, I think, to root for anyone's death—except Henry Kissinger. [laughs] So it's like all these kinds of competing characteristics we're emerging; are we going to be compassionate to each other? Are we gonna have sort of like radical empathy as it's called? Or are we going to be violent as was the aftermath of the Spanish flu? And that turned out to be the answer. What I'm noticing now, especially from people in positions of political power and in the mainstream media and whatnot, is that the masks are off and underneath them is just a hood. We're seeing a very overt embrace of fascism and fascism being portrayed as the way to get back to normal. They're bringing back the mentality of 2015-2016 where autocracy is treated as entertainment.

Sarah Kendzior (11:41):

Only we've actually lived through a proto autocratic administration with the Trump administration. We have witnessed a cavalcade of crimes; them letting COVID spread unimpeded, an attempted coup, multiple acts of obstruction of justice, stealing nuclear secrets and hiding them in the basement of a Florida golf course, and then these useless explanations about why none of this has been resolved, all of which avoid the key component which is the title: *They Knew*. This is a book about complicity. It's a book about people who stand by and let terrible things happen to other people. And it's a book about helplessness and powerlessness. And I don't want people to feel helpless and powerless when they read

it. One of the nicest things people write to me at points—and we both get this about Gaslit Nation—is “Thank you. Now I feel less alone.”

Sarah Kendzior (12:35):

“I feel less like I'm the only one seeing this. I feel less like I'm going crazy. I know that this honestly is as bad as it seems and so, okay, now let's work on how we're going to get through this.” And that's not necessarily having a pat, easy solution to things. I think that's really hard. But kind of psychologically, how do we persevere? How do we remain resilient? That's what I wanna get out of it. I know you, at some point, asked me a question and I completely forgot what it was [laughs]. So this is a classic *Gaslit Nation* episode.

Andrea Chalupa (13:09):

No, but it's true. How do we remain resilient? Like how do we persevere? What did you get out of that from all of your travels across the US?

Sarah Kendzior (13:21):

I realized recently that I have now lived longer in the 21st century than I have in the 20th century. And that was such a strange realization to have. I just had this birthday. I keep wanting to say 29 because that's the lie that I tell my children to tell everyone.

Andrea Chalupa (13:37):

Ha! You're forever 29.

Sarah Kendzior (13:39):

[laughs] Yeah, it's getting really hard because I have a 15 year old daughter. A little question there. But, you know, I turned, uh [clears throat] 44. And so that means I was born in '78, so I spent 22 years in the 20th century and 22 years in the 21st century. And I was thinking to myself, which was worse? Because really it's such a clear demarcation point. Everything truly went to hell starting in the 21st century, starting with 9/11, the war in Iraq, the financial collapse, the lack of a recovery for it, incredible, incredible income inequality, wealth hoarding, opportunity hoarding, entrenched and unimpeded corruption and digital technology, tech companies and “innovations” that I think have made our lives tremendously worse. And I'm just gonna warn everybody, I have been having typical “my book's about to come out” nerves and so to calm my nerves, I've just been scrolling around all the streaming sites and there's not a lot of good stuff on, so I ended up watching *Manhunt* and then the unabomber documentary [laughs] because the thing is, I'm trying to figure out if I or Ted Kaczynski is the most famous Polish American author [laughs], political author in recent history.

Sarah Kendzior (14:57):

There's really not a lot of us. There's this category on Amazon that's like “radical political thought” and I'm always next to Kaczynski and I'm like “big day for the Polish Americans”, you know, living in states that begin with them, writing books about conspiracies. Anyway, sorry, unabomber's bad. Don't bomb things, although! Although, you know, his manifesto is in many ways accurate, minus the sexism and racism and call for violence. His critique of technology, his critique of industrialization, his critique of environmental devastation, a lot of that panned out and if he hadn't been the subject of a bunch of MKUltra experiments when he was at Harvard, he may have made a really positive contribution to the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

No way!

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, you didn't know that? Oh, yeah.

Andrea Chalupa (15:39):

Oh my... Okay, so just so you know, one of the many threads of conversation Sarah and I have—typically off the show because it's just weirdness takes over sometimes when we're chatting—is MKUltra, which is a decades long mind control experiment led by the CIA, which included giving LSD to unsuspecting people around the United States.

Sarah Kendzior (16:07):

Kaczynski was one of the first people to have the “enhanced interrogation”. It's a very euphemistic term. The torture tactics that the CIA used, they tested them out on Kaczynski and other Harvard students while he was at Harvard and they broke him. They absolutely broke him psychologically. And obviously there's no excuse for bombing innocent people and killing them. I was actually really deeply moved when I watched the documentary about his brother, David Kaczynski, who's just this incredibly admirable, compassionate person. He's also the person who had to turn his own brother in and live with the weight of that. But he described how, you know, yeah, he was a weirdo. He was a math genius. No math geniuses tend to be a “regular person” or whatever. But Harvard broke him. I mean, this actually, this may seem off topic, but a lot of this kind of discussion is in *They Knew*. I go into all these things that people, they think they're so outlandish, you know, claims about MKUltra, claims about various state crimes and government conspiracies, including the ones that we talk about on the show with Trump's links to international mafia, the Jeffrey Epstein case, the predecessors to the Jeffrey Epstein case.

Sarah Kendzior (17:15):

When we tell people they're always like, “That's insane. I should have known that.” And the thing is, you and I, given our interests, we should have known this about Ted Kaczynski. You would think this would be a more widely reported piece of information about his background. But I didn't know it until relatively recently. And I only heard the actual tapes—parts of them—of them doing this to him at Harvard recently. And of course this fits into Harvard's long reputation as a place that produces, creates and hires absolutely terrible people. But yeah. Anyway, my point was that the 21st century has been a very dark time. You know, we have seen the world globally shift from democracy—or fledgling democracies—into authoritarian states, semi authoritarian states and even Russia's moving towards being a totalitarian state. And the United States, of course, is moving either towards full autocracy or civil war, not in the traditional 19th century sense but more of a series of terrorists acts mixed with secession movements.

Sarah Kendzior (18:19):

These are all things I'm deeply worried about. And it's... Being this age at this time, you know, knowing that my life is more or less probably more than halfway done actually because life expectancy is dropping rapidly in recent ages, you know, but I am raising children and I'm sort of trying to take a long view in what seems like an existential threat. It's a weird thing to have to do that. So of course I'm thinking about resilience and perseverance, but I'm also just thinking about one day at a time. What do I teach my kids while I have them? What can I do for future generations now? And a lot of what I try to do—we both try

to do—is debunk propaganda, bring people the truth, bring people the true history of this country so that they're not so taken aback by all the horrific things that happen.

Sarah Kendzior (19:07):

That doesn't mean you don't react emotionally to it. I react emotionally. I cry when awful things happen. I cry when people are suffering. Knowing the historical precedence for horrific events doesn't make those events any easier to handle on an emotional level. You still react the same way and in fact the more you know, the deeper the horror goes. And I know you know this with Ukraine because you've spent so much time studying the genocide in Ukraine and then now you're seeing it happen again, which is just an absolutely... It's a nightmarish, horrific feeling. And so for the United States, what's happening now has all these precedents which I get into, especially in terms of government conspiracies against the American people, but to have them all happen at once and have them happen in a digital era, that is new.

Sarah Kendzior (20:00):

We are dealing with a lot of crises that are just unprecedented in the history of humankind and we're dealing with forces that want to make us less human, that in some cases, in extreme cases—you can look at what Peter Thiel is up to you, look at what Jeffrey Epstein was into—people who want genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, but also just a dehumanization that I think comes from the architecture of social media sites and the internet, you know, this decontextualization, mass bullying, a way that cruelty has been normalized where people just say the most abhorrent, awful things to people, intentionally trying to bully people to suicide, all this awful stuff. And then also bots and then people who are indistinguishable from bots, people who are in “stan” culture who worship a celebrity or, even worse, a politician.

Sarah Kendzior (20:54):

And they subsume their identity in that. All of that to me is really alarming. At the dawn of the 21st century, that was the most optimistic I ever was in life, in 1999 when I was, you know, 20 years old, and it seemed like the world was moving in this amazing direction. I loved the internet. I was an early person on the internet because I felt like I could connect with other nerdy people who had my interests, you know, which I describe in the book. And there was so much techno optimism. There was such a sense that if we could just be able to communicate with each other, then we could work out our problems. And that if people from repressive states had a voice, if they didn't have to rely on very difficult print technologies as they had in the 20th century, then they would have revolutions or they just would be able to reveal the truth about their political conditions.

Sarah Kendzior (21:46):

Then as a result of that, their political situation would improve. And all of that proved to be wrong. Exposure doesn't do anything when people don't have shame and when the people, as a large body, don't have leverage. And we've lost leverage in elections. We've lost leverage in protests. We've lost leverage in almost every form except I think in documentation and kind of like relentless refusal to bow down to an official narrative. It's hard to do. When you're witnessing things with your own eyes and ears, you see them clearly and you know they're abhorrent, and you do deep research into why they're happening and you know that you might not have all the answers, but you're at least asking the right questions, and then you're dismissed as alarmist or hysterical or a conspiracy theorist, it can be

demoralizing because that online culture I was talking about before of bullying, mobs or conformists, they're all aimed at you.

Sarah Kendzior (22:46):

So one thing I'm hoping with this book is that people just feel like they can shrug off that stigma. I don't want people to worry so much about what other people are calling them. I don't want them to worry so much about their career in the sense of like, "Oh, I need to be respected by 'respectable' people" because respectable people are often evil people. Bill Barr is respectable. A lot of... Well, not really Trump's lawyers, but a lot of these, you know, legal types or cable news pundits that lie to us, they are the respectable people. The *New York Times* is respectable. The *New York Times* has been respectable and supporting Hitler and supporting Trump and supporting dictators and covering up state crimes for a century. Respectable is not a thing to aspire to. Being honest is a thing to aspire to. Being compassionate towards others is a thing to aspire to.

Sarah Kendzior (23:42):

And it's absolutely not encouraged. And so yeah, I wrote a weird book. Yeah it kind of slides all over the place and has a large array of different subject matter. And yeah, it does devote five pages to a spinoff of the *X Files*. But nonetheless, I think weird is good. It's okay to be genuinely weird. Not like 1990s checking the alternative music box, wearing flannel stereotype gen X commodified weird, but genuinely willing to just be your own person and not spend your life trying to create an online persona or even a real life persona for the benefit of others. I hope our culture moves in that direction because I see competing forces. Like you said, folks are wilding out and there's potentially good in that. There's potentially a kind of freedom in that because people realize that these institutions that they formerly trusted or were taught to venerate have betrayed them.

Sarah Kendzior (24:44):

So why should they work for them? Why should they risk catching a virus or be content with poor pay or whatever for this system? And that part is good. But then I see the other part really buckling down, closing ranks, trying to reaffirm its might in power. And it's very frightening to me that that is happening under a democratic administration, one that has the potential to try to bring accountability and truth to the American public. And I give examples towards the end of the book of times in history where that has happened and it has worked, it has shifted American culture for the better, American political culture. They're not doing that right now. They're acting very timid and hesitant and they're acting like it's a foregone conclusion that we will become either an autocratic state or a collection of partitioned autocracies.

Sarah Kendzior (25:33):

That's how I feel the media and a lot of our political officials are behaving. And I don't know if it's because they truly believe that this is the inevitable outcome and they'd rather remain employed in those circumstances, even if it means they're employed as cheerleaders for fascism, or whether it's something they're trying to cultivate, you know, because a lot of this is led by money, by CEOs, by people with interests that are not ever in the public good. They are class interests and that class is like the 0.0001%. Either way, it's frightening. So I hope that folks in a time of great understandable fear and trauma can still hold onto their moral core and their sense of individuality because I think that that, more than anything, will get you through this time, will make you feel resolute during this time.



Andrea Chalupa (26:24):

Wow. Wonderfully said. I think one of the interesting things you've always shared with people on the show, *Gaslit Nation*, which you're all listening to now, or on your Twitter account and on Facebook, is your travel. You love to travel on road trips across the US. I've been with you driving in Missouri and you've pulled over the car to take photos of the light hitting some old abandoned house in some beautiful way. And then you'll post photos like that online. It's just such a nice little travel journey and you'll share stories of little bits of Americana history, odd things, eccentric things, things that just give so much flavor to the variety of our country and its rich history and silly history and dark history. And this is what's really wonderful about *They Knew*, is it feels like traveling with you. You let people into that world, which I think is an incredibly rich experience. I think it's a big testament to you that you have such a passion for these road trips. And I always wanted you to do some sort of travel series [laughs]. You know, like, "Come see America while you still can!"

Sarah Kendzior (27:55):

Yeah. I'm hoping, you know, for the next book... And I guess we're gonna break news on this show: I am contracted to write another book after *They Knew*, so something will be coming out and I do want it to be that. I'm not gonna give full details of what I wanna do, but it will be a travel log or travel-related of some kind about America, historically and in this time. But yeah, you know, I've always loved to travel since I was able to. I honestly didn't travel much as a kid and I got restless and so the minute I was like 17 and in college, anywhere I could go, I would go. My ex-boyfriend when I was in college, he lived in Lubbock, Texas.

Speaker 1 (28:36):

I remember him saying, "You are the easiest person to please" because we went to a Super K to a K-mart, to get some ice cream one night. And I was like sitting in the parking lot and I'd never been to west Texas before. And this is Lubbock, which smells like cow manure on regular intervals, in the late 1990s. And I was looking up at the stars and the incredible expanse of this Kmart lot and I was like, "God, this is just, this is so beautiful. It's so amazing here" because I had never seen that much space growing up in central Connecticut, an industrial corridor of Connecticut, like I did. And he was like, "My God, you are the cheapest state and the easiest person to please."

Sarah Kendzior (29:20):

That was the first time I really kind of explored that part of the United States. We drove to New Mexico, we drove to Colorado, and I felt so free. I felt so... I don't know, just curious about everything. I wanted to stop and look at everything. I love this country so much. Right after that, I went abroad for the first time. I never left America until I was 20 and I went to Vienna for a semester. And so, you know, that was a huge, uh, culture shock. I had studied German, so it wasn't a language thing. It was just like being outside of America. And it made me realize how deeply American I am. And I don't necessarily mean that in a flattering way. I mean, like, you know, I like McDonald's. I like pro wrestling.

Sarah Kendzior (30:02):

I like arena rock music. I mean, honestly, I have a lot of the interests that the Trump campaign tries to tap into, those very typical kind of trashy American ways of being. They're smart to do that. And if I didn't see right through his incredible bigotry, corruption and evilness, maybe I would join that team. I mean, culturally my tastes are very much more in that field. My politics are the exact opposite, but you know, it just sort of solidified that to me. This is my home. I love visiting other countries. I enjoyed living in other

countries when I did. Briefly I lived in Turkey for a year. I lived in Austria and in Kyrgyzstan for about, I don't know, a third of a year each time. And it's great.

Sarah Kendzior (30:49):

I've been to a lot of countries and it's awesome to see them. It's much harder to do it now with COVID so I'm glad I did that back then. But this is my home and it's a part of me. I feel like it's in my blood. It shapes my mind. It's how I see the world. And that will never change. It's so deep to me. It's like my family comes first and then my writing and then this country. And I'm not saying that either in some sort of hagiographic way, like "America's so awesome. There's nothing wrong with it." I mean, honestly I'm known for criticizing it. But I criticize in that way James Baldwin wrote about where he said, "I love America so much I feel obligated to criticize it relentlessly" because, you know, I love it in a personal gut level "I grew up here" way.

Sarah Kendzior (31:33):

But also it is disastrous, especially at this moment, and it's full of historical injustices that were never remedied, that can be remedied and *must* be remedied for our survival. And so I want that America, that vision of America, that idealized America to exist too. At the same time, you know, I just like to drive around lookin' at stuff. I live in Missouri and I've lived in Missouri for 17 years and it's the literal center of the country. So when my family goes on a road trip, we drive in every direction. We went to the Dakotas and Michigan, we drive to Texas, we drove to the Southeast, we drove to Connecticut. We drove to New Mexico and Colorado and the national parks and Montana. We've driven basically everywhere except for, I guess, the West Coast.

Sarah Kendzior (32:23):

It was just too long a drive with two little kids and we didn't have enough money or time. My kids have seen I think 36 states at this point and it was really important for me that they see how Americans actually live and that there is no "real" America, that urban and rural areas are equally real, that a native American reservation and a majority Latino historically Spanish speaking city and, you know, a small town in Missouri, they're equal. They're all part of our heritage. And I don't want them to buy into stereotypes because I see them plastered all over social media and all over the news and all this very dangerous divisive rhetoric about secession. And I write about that, especially toward the end of *They Knew* in pretty personal terms.

Sarah Kendzior (33:15):

Because St. Louis, you know, at the border of Illinois is historically the focal point of where wars break out. This is where Huck and Jim went down the river on this literal border between a slave state and a free state and you make the wrong move, you know, and you're sold down the river. It's always been contested territory and I would include a lot of the surrounding states in that. You know, Illinois has always been contested, Kentucky, Tennessee to some degree. We're not completely unique, but we've always been kind of at the heart of this conflict. So when a lot of people say, "Oh, you know, the red states should secede or the blue states should secede" and they try to present it as simple, it's bizarre to me living in a very liberal, heavily Black city represented by Cori Bush in a state that's a GOP hijacked state run by a group of deeply corrupt radical right wing Republicans, including the insurrectionist, Josh Hawley, and then, you know, people act like those are two things... that somehow you have to choose one or the other.

Sarah Kendzior (34:22):

I mean, I don't know. They label both in different ways. But it's never lost from my mind that I can literally walk across the bridge and then I'm in Illinois and I'm in a "blue state" which is, of course, not blue. If I walk across the bridge into Illinois, I'm actually walking into a county that voted for Trump—unlike the one I live in—in the state of Missouri. So all these things are more complicated than what they seem. But I do know that people look down on me for living here and I think it's very strange that if I just walked 25 minutes over tollllinois that I maybe would be greeted with more respect or I'd be assumed to be liberal by people who don't know anything about me beyond that I live in Missouri and all this kind of stuff.

Sarah Kendzior (35:03):

It's important to me that not just my children but I wish other Americans would, I don't know, really explore this country. And I know right now it's a very tough time to do that. It's a tough time to sort of open your eyes and open your heart to what's there. And you will witness a lot of really horrific things. You'll witness horrific things throughout history and you'll witness horrific things happening now, but it's a deep love. It's kind of inexplicable in some ways, but it is there for me, and so if I can bring that perspective to people, including to people who live outside America and wanna know what it's "really like"—and like I said, there is no "what it's really like." It's different through everyone's eyes. But I see in all directions due to living in the center of a country that does not hold, so hopefully—hopefully—something useful of value was provided there. [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (35:54):

I would say there is. Catherine Deneuve went on a road trip with a friend of mine across the US. My friend was a publicist during the *Mad Men* era and Catherine, when she visited the US, insisted on doing a Sarah Kendzior-style road trip, where she would go to all these little gin joints and holes in the wall and roadside stands in search of Americana. She was obsessed with it. So I feel like she would really get a kick outta your book. The other thing I wanted to comment on is circle back to earlier in our conversation, when you talked about the generation of the Spanish flu, which was right smack on top of the great war—World War I—and how the artists of that age, how there was this silence of the gruesomeness of that time, the mass death.

Andrea Chalupa (36:49):

And it's really interesting because the writers that came out of that generation, of course, famously Hemingway. Hemingway was somebody who is famous for the iceberg theory, where you have so much that's unspoken in life in between characters, and the richness and that silence. And I just think it's so interesting how that must have been shaped by all the horrors that he endured during the war and in the aftermath of seeing just the world imploding. And that, in turn, the times we're living in is shaping all of us as creators, as thinkers, whatever our craft is. But I do wanna talk about the creative influences when you're working on this book. For me, it's obvious: Stephen King, because you're a huge Stephen King fan. And this feels like reading a Stephen King novel, only richer. What were some texts, what were some works of art that helped you get through the writing process?

Sarah Kendzior (37:47):

Yeah, I mean, there's, you know... [laughs] You could either see them as Easter eggs or shout outs throughout this book; Stephen King, Shirley Jackson. I was reading a lot of horror, a lot of gothic type horror, but I read that anyway. Mark Twain is a huge influence on me, in part because he's a Missouri

author and he writes about a lot of places that I've been. There are also some documentaries and stuff I was watching at the time that sort of just freed my mind up. The Raoul Peck documentary, *Exterminate all the Brutes*, was a really compelling look at brutality and imperialism but it didn't have a narrative structure. It was really unconventional in the way that it expressed that. And I've always liked things like that. One of my favorite movies is *Five Easy Pieces*, which is like a character study that has kind of no plot.

Sarah Kendzior (38:40):

I mean, it does to me, but a lot of people describe it as having no plot. And that's been my favorite movie since I was 13 years old. And so I've always been attracted to that. I was also watching and rewatching *Twin Peaks*. I was watching it all the way through now that it's available on Hulu, and of course that's a very boundary-pushing show, the mysteries of it. I come back to that show a lot because I still feel like I haven't untangled it. Peter Straub, who unfortunately died recently, is another person who was a huge influence on me. His book, *Ghost Story*, is a book I've read every year again because there's that mystery. And so I started really thinking about mystery and the unknowable because this is a book about conspiracies versus conspiracy theories and what we are willing to believe and how power factors into what we're willing to believe.

Sarah Kendzior (39:30):

So I was reading a lot of Carl Jung because he wrote a lot about that. I mean, it's a really weird book and honestly... Oh, and Hunter S. Thompson, who's quoted several times in the book, was an influence because he was writing in a time very much like our own in terms of the sheer, overt corruption of the Nixon era, only he had the satisfaction of actually watching Watergate happen, watching the Church Committee happen, watching the Pike Committee happen, and then he watched it fall apart. And a lot of the essays by him I found really compelling were just collections that he wrote in real time in the 1980s. And I saw all these familiar names in them like Bill Barr and so forth. And I was like, "My God." I've said this for years, but it was more proof that this is just the same stories and the same people over and over again. The villains of our childhood, the villains of our '80s childhood are alive now, which is, I think honestly, one of the reasons Hunter S. Thompson shot himself. And you brought up Hemingway. Hemingway shot himself.

Sarah Kendzior (40:31):

People who witnessed these awful things and kind of have a deep understanding of them. I mean, they both had... Obviously, the two of them had drinking problems. They had gun obsessions, other things going on, but there's a lot of pain there. You know, I think Hunter S. Thompson is someone who's misunderstood. He is known for being wild, for being misogynist. I think there's a lot of soul in that writing. I think the people who try to imitate him, they don't pull it off because they missed the soulfulness and the mourning—the deep sadness—that's in all of those devastating, cutting, sarcastic takedowns of American political life. You talked to me privately when I was trying to start writing this book and at that point, in 2021, I had hit what a lot of people call the pandemic wall, where I just felt like my mind wasn't working.

Sarah Kendzior (41:19):

I had the worst case of writer's block I'd ever had in my life. And for me, writer's block is the same as depression. There isn't a difference. And at that point, you know, when I look back at it, it's like my subconscious had cut off. And in retrospect, it was probably a mercy killing because I think if I had let

myself feel everything that was in my mind, it would've been too much for me. So in retrospect, it's probably good. It played out that way and that I didn't start writing until April or May of 2021. But at the time it felt agonizing because there's so much built up inside you and you can't creatively express it. And then one day, the first line of the book came to me like it does for so many writers while I was taking a shower and I was like, "Oh shit, oh shit. I gotta write that down."

Sarah Kendzior (42:02):

And I ran out of the shower and I ran into my room and I scrawled it on a piece of paper and then went back and washed the conditioner out of my hair. Then I sat down and I started writing and the first few paragraphs came out. And I was kinda like, "Okay, at least I wrote something, at least I can still write. I don't know if this is very good or not. I guess we'll see where it goes." And, you know, then I just kind of committed myself, like "I'm gonna just write 500 words a day because if I do that, I will meet my deadline." This is something I was, as you know, gravely concerned would not happen. I did meet my deadline and as it went on, it got easier. But it is so dark. And we were doing *Gaslit Nation* at the same time.

Sarah Kendzior (42:38):

And I just thought, I cannot do what happened with *Hiding in Plain Sight* where the subject matter I'm talking about on *Gaslit Nation* is very similar and sometimes overlapping with the book I'm writing and it's all incredibly depressing and incredibly upsetting. I've got to figure out a way to process this so that I don't end up like Hunter S. Thompson did, or how Hemingway did. This is getting really personal, but I was worried I was kind of heading in that direction unless I found a way to cope with it. And some things that kept me going were just music. You know, I had this mix. It started out as a mix called "Grim '80s" because I was really kind of thinking about all the, you know... We just did our Wilburys [laugh] *Gaslit Nation* episodes for two months, Andrea and I named all the episodes of *Gaslit Nation* after Traveling Wilburys songs and like one person noticed. Everyone else was just kinda like, "Okay, sure."

Sarah Kendzior (43:27):

"Heading for the Light, Dirty World, alright." Anyway, I was thinking about how in the '80s, the boomers—because they dominate everything—when they got old, when they hit 40, they still made songs and they sang songs about being 40 and being disillusioned and feeling like the world was crumbling around them. And so I started to make a mix of those. It had a lot of Don Henley on it. Don Henley's "All She Wants to Do is Dance" was actually a huge influence on *They Knew* because that is a song about Iran Contra. It's about the Iran Contra affair. It's about drug running. It's about state corruption. It's about getting away with crimes and all these other Don Henley songs from the '80s, all these synthed up, danceable, very, very '80s Huey Lewis and the News sound quality songs are the most bitter, Leonard Cohen-like lyrical compositions.

Sarah Kendzior (44:20):

And I kept thinking, My God, no one has noticed how dark '80s Don Henley is, so I wanna write, you know, maybe in this style. Maybe this is the way to do it. You have a beat to it, you have a rhythm to it and you lose people in the rhythm and then you're able to deliver the devastating truth because everyone is just mesmerized by the synth pop in the background. And so that was this very strange kind of inspirational source for me. It's like, Man, it's good. You're the only one who's gonna get this interview, Andrea. Everyone else I'm gonna be like, "Yes, it was Proust" but here, no, the truth is it was '80s Don Henley. [laughs] Big, big influence. And really, I encourage a critical reexamination of those songs and not

just “End of Innocence” and the well known ones, but other ones. There's a song about “trumped up towers with golden showers”. And it made me... Because this is a conspiracy book I can now say this too.

Sarah Kendzior (45:15):

I was listening to that song. I'm now forgetting what it's called, but that's one of the lyrics. And I'm like, Did the fucking Trump people, when they were trying to make the Steele dossier inaccurate—because we know the broad outlines of the Steele dossier are true; Trump was a Kremlin asset, he's hooked up to oligarchs, none of that is something that you can contest—the whole “Did Trump have a prostitute pee on a bed thing?” I always found questionable, and now I'm like, Did they just reach into the Don Henley B side catalog and grab those lines and just make some shit up? Kind of wondering. Because I feel like Trump is stuck in the late '80s. Mentally, he never progressed beyond there. That's why his favorite song is “Memory” from *Cats*. And *They Knew* is also to some degree stuck in the late '80s.

Sarah Kendzior (46:04):

You know, there's a lot of '80s crime that I get into; BCCI, the Craig Spence case, etc., etc.. So it felt right to me to have this mix playing in the background that was all dark '80s songs by boomers, like “Pressure” by Billy Joel, some stuff that was just sort of like moody in the right way like “Moving in Stereo” by The Cars, you know, all this kind of shit. “Scarecrow” by John Cougar Mellencamp. I should post this mix and truly humiliate myself.

Andrea Chalupa:

You should do the “They Knew” Spotify.

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh God. And my family went insane. They knew the minute... Because this first song was “Moving in Stereo” and so they would hear that they'd hear those synth chords and they're like, “oh God”. You know, my kids would be like “mommy's writing” and they just knew, you know, they couldn't go in my room until that thing played through, until that mix was done because it was like Pavlovian.

Sarah Kendzior (46:50):

And now I'm at the point where if any of these songs come on, like if “The Boys of Summer” comes on, I mentally going to the state of wanting to write *They Knew* or edit *They Knew* and so I've had to just turn that off. Hopefully I'll like all these songs again. Right now, I'm so sick of them that if I hear any of the songs from the *They Knew* mix, I can't listen to them. And I did the same thing with *Hiding in Plain Sight*, which eventually showed up actually as an apocalypse mix on our show when we were doing the COVID specials and somebody actually asked us for an apocalypse mix. A lot of that was just what I listened to while writing *Hiding in Plain Sight*. Anyway, this is a window into the Kendzior creative process, which is probably far less inspiring than you'd hoped.

Sarah Kendzior (47:28):

But for everyone out there—and I'm serious here—if you're struggling with writer's block at this time, with depression, with trying to take in all the horrible things and then you're thinking to yourself on top of it, “Oh my God, I have this professional pressure or creative pressure and I can't produce and I'll never get it back”, I'm not gonna guarantee that you will get it back, but I fully believed that my writing career in life—and my writing life is much more important to me than my career—was over. I felt like I would

never write again. I felt like whatever part of my brain sends me into the zone and lets me create these sentences and these paragraphs, I felt like it was gone forever and I was just devastated. And then it came back.

Sarah Kendzior (48:13):

It really did. And I think some of it was a miracle. Some of it was that sort of magical inspiration feeling, you know, anybody who does creative works does. And then the rest was just being persistent. It was forcing myself to sit there and write it and work through it and process it. And I still think, you know, well, thank God that actually happened. That's how I feel after I write anything. I'm like, oh my God, it's real. It's done. Thank God. It still exists. And I can still do it because it doesn't feel completely in my control. And so I guess I just wanna extend some comfort to people struggling now because I've seen this from a lot of creative people during the pandemic, that they felt that same sense of helplessness. And while I never would wish that on anyone, I would feel better when I'd see some really accomplished writer or somebody who I really admired saying, "For the first time in my life, I'm stuck. I can't do it. I feel burnt out in a way I never have felt before." And then I rebounded and other folks have rebounded and it's okay if you're not rebounding. It's okay if you're just taking care of yourself. It's okay if you're giving yourself time. It's a process to heal, to rest, whatever. I hope folks do that because I think if I had just accepted that earlier, if I had said to myself, "You need a break. You need to sort of dial it back a little and eventually it will come. Have some faith for once in your life." Because I'm not great at that. I wish I had taken care of myself in a positive way. So I guess that's something I want people to take away from this conversation.

Andrea Chalupa (49:44):

That's beautiful advice and so good on you for trusting your instincts and being vulnerable, letting it all out there. I think that it totally paid off. The work is... I keep going back to the word rich. It just has such a richness to it. It is such a wonderful, gripping journey and it's an intimate one. And I think anybody who would read it would feel like they know you like I know you. And I think it's just such an essential book to read to find comfort and guidance and also just to understand the long painful history of the United States. And if you understand that, everything we're dealing with now makes so much more sense and you have a clear idea of where things are headed. So those are all reasons, of course, to read it. And I do wanna also commend the team; your editors, your publisher. Because you took risks.

Andrea Chalupa (50:37):

You took creative risks. You put your beautiful, shining so-called freak flag out there as we all should as creative people. And they didn't try to, as far as I understood because you would've complained to me otherwise—they trusted you too. And I think that is such a testament to them too, because sometimes when you have collaborators, they might get too scared or they might be fiercely generic or they might just have bad taste and you weren't held back, it seems, by any of that. And you were allowed the freedom to express yourself and it's obviously clearly to everyone's benefit now.

Sarah Kendzior (51:16):

That is true. And that is something I worried about. My editor, I wanna give her a shout out, Bryn Clark. She edited *Hiding in Plain Sight*. She's great. When you have an editor, it's a weird thing, even if you don't meet that person in real life very much, in some sense, they know you better than a lot of people you actually see in your life because they're seeing your thought process. They're seeing rough drafts of your thoughts, you know, the things that you present to the public in a polished form. So there's a lot of

vulnerability there. So of course I sit there thinking, Please understand me, please understand who I am and what I'm trying to do. And I was just incredibly relieved that she did not at all hold me back from the creative risks in the book, that she did understand what I was going for.

Sarah Kendzior (51:57):

Of course she had suggestions and comments and everything, and that's great. That's what an editor's supposed to do. But yeah, I didn't feel constrained. I was very worried also about legal review [laughs] because... I think I can talk about this now. To a degree, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, as you recall, Andrea, from our private conversations, was a very unpleasant legal review. I did not do anything wrong. I've never had to issue a retraction. I've never had anything proved to be wrong. I've never been sued, etc., etc. There was a lot of worry about my descriptions of various mafiosos and oligarchs and there was a lot of, you know, the lawyer language, a lot of "allegedly" and Felix Sater having to be described as a "mafia adjacent actor" instead of the word that I had used and whatever. I don't wanna be sued.

Sarah Kendzior (52:44):

Obviously I also don't wanna be murdered. Some of that is understandable, but then there is another incident which I'm not gonna get into, but there was a time period I thought, "This book is not coming out. They're going to kill it at the last minute and it's just not gonna come out." It was a very stressful situation. That did not happen this time, possibly because most of the people in *They Knew* are dead. So, you know, important lesson to you. Go ahead and make a cross stitch of this and hang it on your wall: The dead can't sue. But I also did not wanna go back into, "Hi, I'm writing about the mafia again." I mean, I did anyway, but not as much because it was really scary. So yeah, I was so grateful that they let me have that kind of creative freedom.

Sarah Kendzior (53:26):

I'm really relieved this morning. We should say we're taping this... I don't even know what day it is. September 9th. And the first excerpt of it that anyone has seen ran in *Vanity Fair* today. And so far, the response has been really positive. And it's just a profound relief because, you know, in my mind I'm thinking, "Oh my God. People are gonna hate this or they'll be expecting something and they're gonna get this weird story about a ghost hotel in Arkansas instead." And I'm just..., I'm relieved. So yeah, if you work in publishing, I hope you if you see other weird authors living in places where authors aren't supposed to live, like Missouri and whatnot, take a chance on them please, because there's a lot of talent out there.

Sarah Kendzior (54:13):

A lot of unconventional thinkers who don't, I think, get the kind of platforms and attention that they should, the kind that I have now, whereas a lot of really cookie cutter Matt Yglesias types... Sometimes, sorry, I don't mean to name a specific person, but it's like he really embodies this, you know, who are just saying what people who are powerful and wealthy wanna hear, and live in New York and come from very famous prestigious families and whatnot. They do get all this attention and it deprives the American public of a range of perspectives and it deprives culture of creativity. We've had so many great, wonderful creative eras in American history, a lot of it coming from a counterculture that is an opposition to a monoculture. And now we've lost the monoculture, which I do discuss in *They Knew*. We've kind of lost the counterculture, or at least it doesn't get the kind of push. People put out really unique and imaginative things and then it's not seen because of algorithms, because of corporations and



so on. So I hope folks see that my weird little books are also commercially viable and that they lend their support to other people's weird little books. That would make me really happy.

[outro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

Pakistan has been decimated by record floods and people need help. To help the victims of the floods, donate to Pakistan Emergency Flood Aid at [https://www.launchgood.com/campaign/pakistan\\_emergency\\_flood\\_aid#!/](https://www.launchgood.com/campaign/pakistan_emergency_flood_aid#!/). Climate and economic crises are everywhere so please consider supporting your local food bank as well.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine a [razomforukraine.org](http://razomforukraine.org). We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at [rescue.org](http://rescue.org). And if you wanna help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at [theorangutanproject.org](http://theorangutanproject.org).

*Gaslit Nation* is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon, it keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our production manager is Nicholas Torres and our associate producer is Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

Andrea Chalupa:

Original music in *Gaslit Nation* is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Vissenberg, Nik Farr, Demien Arriaga and Karlyn Daigle.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Smyth of the New York-based firm, Order. Thank you so much, Hamish

Andrea Chalupa):

*Gaslit Nation* would like to thank our supporters at the Producer level on Patreon and higher...