

**JOE MCGONEGAL:** This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal Director of Alumni Education. Fans of the MIT Assassin Guild will appreciate the setting of Livia Blackburne's new novel, *Midnight Thief*. *Midnight Thief* is the story of a young woman-- Kyra-- making her way through adolescence in a medieval village, and struggling with the decision to join a local assassin's guild, or be true to her native roots. Here's an excerpt.

**LIVIA BLACKBURNE:** It was like the world around her disappeared. The storehouse turned fuzzy. Sound became muffled. Everything went out of focus except for the menservants body crumpled now at her feet.

Kyra stared at him, then at his blood-soaked hands. What had she done? James wasted no time. Ignoring Kyra completely, he signaled Rand. With well-practiced efficiency, Rand disentangled his body from Kyra, threw it over his shoulder, and carried it outside.

James gave a few short instructions to Shea and Alex, who picked up some last bundles and scanned the area to clear any signs of their presence. Then he approached Kyra, who was still frozen near the door. Clean yourself off and stay out of the way.

Within minutes, they were ready to leave. As Shea pulled her out of the storehouse, she looked for the body, but didn't see it anywhere. Her mind was thick and cloudy, disconnected from the rest of her. Somewhere in the fog, there might have been thoughts screaming to be heard, but she walked in a haze.

At one point, they were in front of the kennel, and James ordered her to unlock the door. Somehow, they made their way out. James grabbed her arm outside the guild house so hard that she cried out. But the pain brought her back to her senses, and she looked up to find him staring at her. Wash yourself out back, he said.

Kyra fled out the back door, casting about until she got her bearings. She saw the basan and thrust her hands in. This late at night, the water was freezing. She whimpered at the shock, but she kept her hands submerged, rubbing them under water until she could no longer feel them.

When they finally came clean, she inspected her clothing. Her outer tunic was stained and crusted with red-brown splotches. She pulled it off and threw it away in disgust.

She was shaking violently now, chilled by the cold water and wind. She crept, trembling, back into the guild house. The others were still unpacking the bundles, and James stood talking to Alex in a corner.

Kyra stepped toward them, then stopped. She couldn't. Even Rand look dangerous and frightening in the flickering lanterns. Kyra took one last look at James to make sure he wasn't watching, and bolted for the front door. Once out on the street, she ran.

**MCGONEGAL:** *Midnight Thief* is Blackburne's debut novel. Blackburne-- who received her PhD in course NINE in 2013-- returned to writing young adult fiction during her grad years, which focused on the neuro correlates of reading in children. Her hero struggles with inequality, labor disputes, and national security in medieval times. The novel is also a psychological tale about war. Livia Blackburne, thanks for joining me. Talk about how the idea for this book first came to you.

**BLACKBURNE:** It did start back in high school, and I actually wrote it to get out of a camping requirement. Every year, we have to go on some kind of camping trip. It's called experiential education, and it's supposed to build character or something. And it's like this really-- it's hardcore camping. And I think after a few years, I decided I'd had enough character to build.

So there was this other option. You could propose a different project. Instead, I said, well, maybe I can read a novel, because it's sort of like camping. Not really.

And to my surprise, it got passed. And so my sophomore year, I wrote about 40 pages of a novel. It was about a thief named Lana, and she had a best friend Kyra.

And throughout high school, I worked on the novel on and off. It was my senior project as well. And so by the end of high school, I had about 80 pages. It was not very good at all. It read like a novel written by a high schooler trying to get out of a camping trip.

But I did get one piece of really good advice from an English teacher. He told me, well, this one character Kyra, she's the most interesting character out of all of them. She has the most personality.

And so I went to college, focused on biochemistry. Didn't really do any reading or writing for about 10 years or so. And then fast forward to now, I'm a grad student at MIT in the brain and cognitive sciences department. I'm in my third year, and I'm taking a neuroscience course at Harvard Medical School.

And it's cold in the fall, so when I'm waiting for the M2 shuttle, I wait in the Harvard coop, and they had a display one day when I was reading. There was this hot new YA series coming out about a girl and her vampire boyfriend, of all things. I picked it up and I started reading, and just got accountably addicted, bought all four books, went back home, read the whole thing in about three days. And that just kind of reminded me how much I loved reading, and how I had once wanted to be a YA author.

And so I went back, took Kyra, and built a story around her this time. It was a nice break from my PhD research to come home and do something completely different. And so that took me about three years writing, and I gradually got more serious, got a critique group, researched agents.

And it turned out I got interest fairly quickly about the book. They all had such great ideas about how I could take the book further, and how I could make it better. And I thought as a first-time novelist, I could really use the support system to make it a good novel.

So I did sign on with an agent. I guess the rest is history after that. We sold to Disney Hyperion, and I worked on it with my editor for another two or three rounds of revision, and it came out in July.

**MCGONEGAL:** I frequently ask, how is your MIT education alive and well with this book? I don't know that it applies here, but can you tell me?

**BLACKBURNE:** Especially since my dissertation was on the neural correlates of reading in children, it sounds like it's pretty similar, but actually, my dissertation was more on the word level, like letter recognition, word recognition, whereas a novel is more on a global scale. So I would say my research itself didn't really apply. But what I found really helpful though was the social psychology I learned while studying for my quals, so I learned a lot about different cultures, different ways of doing things, different world views. And in my novel, there's several different societies. It was really useful to use that knowledge to build different societies that thought differently than we do.

**MCGONEGAL:** The book seems kind of timeless, a coming of age story for a young woman figuring out her identity in a city called Forge. My mind immediately jumps to the Middle Ages, although there are some anachronisms in it. I laughed when I got to the wicking shirts. I said, boy...

[LAUGHTER]

**BLACKBURNE:** Yeah, it's like a medieval dry weave or something.

**MCGONEGAL:** But you seem to avoid putting us in a certain time. Was there an effort on your part to make it more timeless?

**BLACKBURNE:** Part of it was laziness, really -- Well, see, if I chose a certain time, then I would be wrong on certain things. So part of it was just make things safer for me, is to make it in a different world.

And I mean, it's not in our world. It's in a world with magic. So in that sense, it made sense that it wouldn't match up completely to a time in our world.

**MCGONEGAL:** It's the story of Kyra struggling among three worlds. We meet her first as a peasant. She finds work for the assassin's guild. And she ends up as a spy for the royal establishment, seeking to right the wrongs from within the feudal system. Did you think of current events as you wrote this?

**BLACKBURNE:** I was kind of. So the theme kind of came in subconsciously, and then it was my editor actually, who suggested that I play up the social class issues. And at that time, that was when the whole 99%, the protests were going on all over the country. And so then she mentioned it, and that really struck a chord with both of us, and it really gave me something to work off of.

It's interesting how things going on kind of seep into your consciousness. I'm writing the sequel right now, and without giving too many spoilers, there's a crime that occurs, and the people who commit it don't get-- they have the charges dropped against them, because they're in a position of power. And I'm writing it, and then things are currently happening that are relevant to that as well. So it's funny how it just kind of seeps into your fiction, I think, just what is going on.

**MCGONEGAL:** Amazon's algorithm tells me that customers who bought *Midnight Thief* also bought books by Mary Pearson, by Marry Weber, by Sarah Lawson, by Danielle Jansen. Do you consider it an honor to be among some of these? How do you see your rise here in your career as a novelist?

**BLACKBURNE:** One of the best things I think, about getting back into YA is that I've kind of rediscovered reading for myself as well. Some of the authors you mentioned, I haven't read any of them yet, but I really want to read the Mary Pearson. I've actually met Mary Pearson, just on the circuit. She's very nice. I really want to read that book.

And there's a *Snow Like Ashes* that I'm really excited about reading as well. My favorite series at the moment is *The Queen's Thief* series by Megan Whelan Turner. I think the third book in that series, *The King of Attolia*, might be one of my favorite books ever. I do notice myself taking inspiration from their work as well. I have a few little in-jokes in my current novel that kind of are nods to the books I've really enjoyed recently.

**MCGONEGAL:** Tell me about just the reading audience. It's such a different audience that you met out on the book circuit, or that you hear from the correspondent.

**BLACKBURNE:** So when I first went out on book tour, I was kind of nervous about public speaking, because it's not my favorite thing to do. But then it was so much fun, and I soon realized that public speaking to a wide book audience is completely different from giving a scientific talk at a conference. They're happy to see you, and they're not waiting to shoot down all your data or something. It's all very fun. So yeah, I've really enjoyed it.

And I think that's probably the most rewarding aspect of being an author, is just I love hearing people's reaction as they're reading, what they make of the characters. And I think one thing that I understood cerebrally, but not really had a grasp on was how differently everyone will interpret a certain work. One person will think that Kyra is a super strong heroine because she sticks to her principles, while another person will think that Kyra is a completely weak character because she doesn't like to kill people. And it's just really interesting seeing how I put the word out there, and then people are viewing it through all their different lenses. I guess also with my psychology background, I find that interesting.

**MCGONEGAL:** There's the great psychological thriller of all time, *Macbeth* too, I was reminded of in reading this. There's the washing of the hands that Kyra does at one point, reminded me a lot of Lady Macbeth. You make reference to the [? Philby ?] story, Lady Eveline, et cetera. Did that require a lot of research on your part, or was it just mostly things you picked up in reading?

**BLACKBURNE:** Well the *Macbeth* was another a subconscious thing that I picked up on later. Lady Eveline and the [? Philbys, ?] I just-- I kind of just made that one up. And it was later on in the edits to round out the world and foreshadow some plot developments.

**MCGONEGAL:** And tell me about your career in neuroscience. How's that going?

**BLACKBURNE:** Yeah, I got my degree, and then started writing YA novels. So not doing much of that anymore. But still keeping up with what my friends are doing.

**MCGONEGAL:** Livia Blackburne's new book *Midnight Thief* is now available online, or at your favorite local bookstore. Livia Blackburne, thanks for joining me.

**BLACKBURNE:** Well, thanks for having me. It was fun.