Geraldine Brooks is an award-winning author and journalist who was born in Australia (1955). Raised on the outskirts of Sydney and educated at Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney, she worked for three years as a reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. While there, she won a prestigious scholarship—the Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents Scholarship—to the master's program in journalism at Columbia University. Brooks earned her masters degree in 1983 and began work as a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*.

As a foreign correspondent, she traveled to the Middle East, among other places of conflict, and in 1990 she won—with her husband, journalist Tony Horwitz—the Overseas Press Club's Hal Boyle Award for "Best Newspaper or Wire Service Reporting from Abroad" for their coverage of the Gulf War. Brooks' experience as a journalist led to her first book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, which was published in 1994. The book became an international best seller and was translated into seventeen languages.

Her second book, *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey From Down Under to All Over* (1997), describes her upbringing in Australia and her development as a journalist through a series of international pen pal relationships. This book won the Nita Kibble Literary Award for women's writing.

Brooks then embarked on a new form of writing: historical fiction. Published in 2001, her first novel, *Year of Wonders*, became an international bestseller. The novel tells the story of a 1666 plague village—based on the actual village of Eyam in Derbyshire—that quarantined itself in an attempt to control the contagion. We hear the story through a maid-turned-healer, Anna Firth, who strives to save as many people as possible. Over two-thirds of the villagers died during the plague year.

In 2006, Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for her second novel, *March*, which was inspired by Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The book tells the untold story of Mr. March, the girls' father, who is absent in Alcott's account. In Brooks' book March leaves home (Concord, MA) to join the Union cause and serve as army chaplain in the Civil War. Through his account we experience the horrors of war, suffer his disillusionment with the cause, and come to the realization that abolition will not happen quickly—if at all.

Another bestseller, *People of the Book*, followed in 2008 and was translated into twenty languages. Here Brooks traces the fictionalized history of a sacred text, the Sarajevo Haggadah, from its present-day location back through five centuries to its creation in Muslim-ruled Spain. The novel won two awards: the Australian Book of the Year Award and the Australian Literary Fiction Award.

Most recently, Brooks published *Caleb's Crossing* (2011), which follows the story of Caleb Cheeshahteaumauk—the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College. Told by his Anglo-American friend, Bethia Mayfield, we enjoy lush descriptions of the island landscape and experience the disturbing effects of early American assimilation attempts. Since Caleb graduated in 1665, only one other member of the Wampanoag tribe has received an undergraduate degree from Harvard: Tiffany Smalley graduated in May of 2011.

Today, Geraldine Brooks lives on Martha's Vineyard with her husband, Tony Horwitz, and their two sons. I met with her on November 10, 2011, at Ogden High School. Brooks was in town as the invited speaker for The Ogden School Foundation's annual fall author event.

Becky Jo: Thank you for supporting the Ogden School Foundation.

GB: It's just really encouraging to find a community that's behind its public schools in this way.

BJ: You must get lots of requests to speak, what made you pick this, to come to Utah? We are so honored to have you.

GB: To support public education and to be asked to come is such an honor, with such a great list of writers. I couldn't turn it down really.

BJ: My sense is that you really enjoy working with students. I heard some great things about your experience with them this morning. But, when you were talking to the high school students today, I was intrigued because you were talking about . . . you talked about this in your book . . . that you are shy.

GB: Used to be. Got over it.

BJ: Used to be. Now you're not, you're over that?

GB: Now I am impossible. (Laughs)

BJ: I've had similar experiences. It's not my first thing, I tend to want to hole up and read a book. How do you enjoy this whole book tour thing? I understand you have recently finished, or are still on a book tour?

GB: I finished in the spring and it was very intense because now with e-books, it's not a leisurely schedule. It used to be that they would stagger the publication of the books in the various markets. I could do a tour and then go home and put my feet up for a week and then go to Australia and then the same thing and then go to England later. But now because of e-books being accessible globally, the books have to be published simultaneously and you really just reel from one book tour to another. I'm not complaining; I'm very pleased that people want me to come and talk about my work. It's a fantastic honor and a relief that anybody cares, but it's really tiring and the older I get . . . and also travel is not what it used to be.

BJ: No it isn't! It's not a luxury.

GB: You start your day being either irradiated or groped by the TSA every day for months and it kind of wears you out. At the end of it, you are so sick of the sound of your own voice that you just want to go on a silent retreat.

BJ: That's my impression. So I wondered do you come away from any of these… (Maybe you know interacting with students changes that a little bit)… but can it energize you and stimulate you?

GB: Yes, the book tour is one thing, because that's day after day. But just to come out of my hobbit hole and be with a community, particularly a community like this one—very inspiring people—I had dinner with the foundation, board members, and volunteers last night and it's just really reassuring because so many people just want to be "Us" and "Them." And you know, "my kids are okay so I don't care what's happening to somebody else's kids" and it's just fantastic to be in a community where you get the sense that everybody is invested in these schools and in making them great. It's encouraging.

BJ: It is a rare bright light, I have to say.

GB: It really is a model; it'd be great to figure out a way to sort of spread it. (Laughs).

BJ: Yeah, encourage others.

GB: And the schools are just so beautiful, to walk into a school and see the pride that people have in it. And the students, the students are all so well put together and there's obviously just a real sense of pride and purpose here.

BJ: Yeah, it's a good place. My kids are in the system, so I'm very pleased.

GB: My kids go to public school too. We're lucky; we live in one of these outliers where everybody pulls together. Last town meeting, the finance committee for the town had recommended a modest reduction in the school budget and they just got howled off the stage.

BJ: Good. (Laughs)

GB: The community was not having it, you know, "what are you saying? We have to go without music? We have to go without Spanish?" "No! We'll pay our taxes," and you know it's very childish thinking to say you can have a worthwhile society but nobody has to pay taxes to support it.

BJ: Right, I was glad to hear your response to the first question from the student—about language—that that was your one regret, not learning more languages or doing more with language. Because that's something we're struggling with over at the University—language programs getting cut—and certainly on the high school level.

GB: English speakers are the laziest people on earth because we can get away with it. You go over to Europe and they just switch from one language to another to another. Also in the Arab world, the elite, the kids are growing up completely fluent in two or three languages. They're going to eat our lunch. (Laughs).

BJ: I've been lobbying within our department. We actually have an option for students to do 6 hrs of foreign language or 6 hours of language arts (which can be pretty much anything) and I've been arguing for more foreign language because that really isn't much.

Um, okay, I wanted to ask you about, this is something that intrigues me personally, because I have read almost everything you have written. I started with the historical fiction and then have kind of been working back through your work. I just finished *Foreign Correspondence*, which explores your life through a series of pen pals, which you talked about quite a bit today. So you published this in 1999 and then you moved to *Year of Wonders,* which was more historical fiction and you talked about that quite a bit today: how you got inspired to write that. So what made you switch forms of writing?

GB: It's just the necessity of wanting to be a mother who could be around for her kids as my mother was. I loved my childhood even though materially it was pretty meager, it was rich in other ways and a lot of that had to with parental attention and the fact that my mother was there when I got home from school. And I knew that that wouldn't be the case if I stuck with the kind of journalism I had been doing—or even non-fiction book writing—because you have to be prepared to go whole-hog and just follow those stories as far as they go. You can't say I am going to go for a week to "X" and I'll get what I need. You have to be in it, and you have to go wherever the stories take you to do it well. I know that because my husband is a non-fiction writer, and when he is on the hunt with his books, it's not predictable. I wanted a different kind of life, so it was just lucky for me that the transition worked out.

BJ: I have been telling my friends and colleagues this: I feel like you have really hit your stride with historical fiction—it's just brilliant.

GB: Well I love doing it, and I want to get better and better at it.

BJ: I know you talked about this as well today—how you get your inspiration—and there's an article that our local paper published.

GB: I haven't seen it.

BJ: I will bring you a copy tonight at the dinner. The author talks about, I know he interviewed you, on voids—that you look for some kind of void, and today you talked about how there are gaps in

our historical knowledge. How do you know when you have found a good one? Do you start doing research and then do you sometimes have to get rid of the idea?

GB: Yeah, if there's too much. It's kind of a paradox, but if the historical record is too rich, then it's not for me, then it's for a narrative historian. They can write a factual account. So for example if Caleb had written a journal and it had come down to us, then it wouldn't have been for me. But because we don't know anything about him, the only way to sort of interrogate the question of what his life was like, is to use imaginative empathy to do it.

BJ: And yet it's so ironic because I think most of us finish one of your novels and say, "oh, I need go find out more about this person." It's the first thing we do.

GB: Yes, that's what I hope. I hope I am the gateway drug to history. (Laughs)

BJ: You have to look up the plague. You have find out "who's this Caleb." You have to see his picture.

GB: Well it worked that way for me. One of the historical fiction writers that I loved as a young woman was Mary Renault who wrote about ancient Greece. I had never done any ancient history, I was a modern history person, and her *Alexander* trilogy just sent me over. I think that a happy bi-product of historical fiction is if you can get people to go back and say, "I want to know more."

BJ: Right, right. Well, it's been a pleasure too to get to the end of your books and think, "I need to find out more." So, how do you know . . . this is kind of related . . . when you're doing your research, I guess you kind of answered this, so how do you know when you're done? When you can't find anymore?

GB: You find out what there is, but I don't then keep researching. I research until I can hear a voice that's going to be the narrator of the novel and then she will tell me what I need to know. I do the writing and the research like this, you know one fits into the other, so I let the story tell me what it is that I need to go and find out.

BJ: That's great.

GB: Because otherwise I think you can just get lost in the research.

BJ: You can go forever.

GB: And also then you can start manipulating the story to fit what you know, rather than letting the story do the telling and letting the plot drive the train. I really believe in plot. I'm not really a convinced modernist, you know, I know a lot of writers think plot is the least important thing. Not to me. I really like a good story, and I love reading to my sons, because children's and YA literature really understand the necessity of one thing inexorably leading to the next and you know, if X is interesting, it must lead to Y and Y must be X+ more interesting.

BJ: Yes, I am very satisfied with plots too. I need plot. Oh, digital technology, this is kind of related. You talked about this discovery—this moment—when you were 9, when you figured out that you had this lust for books, and when you were describing books I remembered my own early experiences with books. And still to this day, I smell a book when I get it—there's something about the smell. Is this changing, are we changing this experience for our children and the next generation with e-books?

GB: I think we are, yeah. I see it with my own son, you know he's grown up where books are like wallpaper; they are just part of our life and the fabric of our house and thinking about where the shelves go and where can we find room for more shelves. That's the world he grew up in, but he keeps none of his books. He's not sentimentally attached to the book as object. And he can't wait to have a Nook or a Kindle or whatever. He likes the austerity of it, of not having clutter of it. I think they are different—this generation that's coming up. And you know, I hope that there will be a place

for both. I can see the virtues of e-books, for books that are of more transient interest, particularly contemporary non-fiction or political investigations. I have a huge shelf of books devoted to the Middle East and of them, there's probably only three that are real classics. The rest of them were useful at the time, but now events have moved on. So they could have easily been e-books and the planet would have been better for it. Environmentally, provided we dispose of our electronics responsibly, I think it's probably better than cutting down trees and driving heavy things across the country. I worry about towns without bookstores. That's the greatest.

BJ: There is something pretty amazing about being able to get an e-book right away. My students recently finished reading *Moby Dick*, which I thought was a crazy book to have them read, but this was a big chore for them. They're not used to reading books of that size.

GB: Well they are actually, I beg to differ.

BJ: Good!

GB: Because JK Rowling, bless her heart, took away the fear of the big fat book. And for a while, my elder son evaluated books by heft. If it was short, he thought it can't be any good. So I don't think they're afraid of the big book. I think they're afraid of the huge digressions in *Moby Dick*, like "get on with it!" (Laughs).

BJ: Right! (Laughs).

GB: I don't think it was the heft that made it a chore.

BJ: Yeah, we did talk quite a bit about whether they're actually digressions or not. I'm passionate about the book.

GB: Yes…right.

BJ: But what was interesting was that they came up with a neat solution to what was obviously a problem for them: getting through a lot of material. They downloaded the audio book, and so they listened to it while they read it. And I just wondered what you thought about some of the more exciting innovations for digital technology?

GB: I feel like I am the monk in the medieval monastery doing my beautiful illuminated manuscript, and somebody comes riding up on the mule to the monastery gates, and they've got the first broadside off the Gutenberg press. And it's horrible—it's all smeary and full of misprints—and I look at it and go, "this will never catch on." (Laughs). And now we're seeing the sophistication in these devices, and the way it's opening up other possibilities, like you're talking about. I think it's too early to say; we're in a period of creative destruction. I feel optimistic because we're always going to need stories—for somebody who is at heart a storyteller . . . again it goes back to the bookstore so, we're going to have to figure out another paradigm, because I think we'll miss that. I don't think any of us know how we are going to find the books that we want to read. But I think publishers have reason to be quaking in their boots. In the end, it will be a much more direct relationship between the reader and the writer.

BJ: Yes, because of all of the self-publishing.

GB: And in the end, you know, I don't think it will be too bad.

BJ: And you know, as a teacher of writing—technical writing is what I teach mainly, but also literature—I am encouraged by various electronic forms of writing, because to me, students are writing more than ever, in some ways. You know if you count texting, if you count blogs.

GB: I think that's true. I think about the teenager of my day was getting on that telephone and just saying nothing for hours on end. (Laughs). And now they say nothing by text—but at least they

have to read and write. And I do think that they're more comfortable with that epistolary relationship. What worries me is when I hear them talking. Their talk is like haiku; it's so sparse. And when you think about how people used to express themselves in these beautiful complete sentences—that's gone.

BJ: Right, right. That's the key, complete sentences. I've heard critiques of PowerPoint sort of corrupting people the same way, forcing your thoughts into bullet points instead of complete thoughts and paragraphs and things like that.

Okay, you talked a little bit about this this morning, and I know myself, that as I've gotten older I certainly don't miss the crazy days of my youth, but do you ever miss being a foreign correspondent?

GB: Oh yeah, sure.

BJ: That long, open-ended assignment you were talking about…

GB: You know it's not so much that I miss it; it's just that I am absolutely grateful for every minute of it. I wouldn't be able to do what I do now without it. It was just so exciting and testing. It was an incredible privilege to have had those experiences and incredible good luck to have got out of it in one piece. And um, would I do it again? There are occasions: the story in Iran intrigues me. I love the Iranian people; I don't think we have a proper understanding of that country as Americans. I think we're on the precipice of doing something really dangerous and misguided there, because it's just this thin crust of government and the people underneath that. You know, we can't go to war with the Iranians because 90% of the Iranians are not in support of what's going on and that would just be brutal and unfair. But the minute we do that, they are great nationalists, and they will rally to their country so it would be so counter-productive. So yeah, when you have a deep feeling for a place, and you see that it is not being well reported, it drives you to think about it. But then I think, I've chosen another life now, and I have people who depend on me, and I just don't want to put them through that now.

BJ: It reminds me of, we've had in the past, climbers who've come and talked to us. It's that same issue: how do they justify the risk they're taking by leaving their family and pursuing an extreme sport, which in a way, your reporting was.

GB: You've really got to have foreign correspondents. I mean the climbing thing; I totally understand how satisfying that is to the individual. But it's not a benefit to society, it's not a necessity. Whereas it is a necessity, if we are going to have foreign adventures, that somebody is there to say what really is going on.

BJ: Right, I agree. So, I heard an interview you did with Diane Rehm a while back, and you talked to her about the woman graduate, the Wampanoag, the woman who was due to graduate in the spring. Have you followed up with her?

GB: Yeah, yeah! Tiffany. I'm in touch with her and her family. She is working in Washington, in Native American political affairs, which is fantastic. I think she's going to be a great leader.

BJ: Everybody is so surprised to hear that she is just the second member of her tribe to graduate from college.

GB: Not the second, I mean there are lots of Native Americans who graduate… but second Wampanoag.

BJ: Right, Wampanoag.

GB: It's a reasonably small tribe. Many of them have been to the graduate schools at Harvard. But yeah, she is the first.

BJ: So when you talk to her, from your own experience, do you have a sense of why it's taken so long…300 years?

GB: I think Harvard has a lot to answer for in that regard. I don't think their outreach has been very good until recently, and now they've completely flipped the script on that. They are making a thorough going effort to reach out and tell people "Harvard is the place for you." And that is what happened to Tiffany: she went there as a senior and was encouraged to apply. And it was their open door and their re-embrace of their original mission…

BJ: It took them a long time, didn't it?

GB: It says in the founding document, "for the education of English and Indian youth of this country and knowledge and godliness," so it was there from the beginning and then buried under 20 tons of white male WASPy super privilege for a couple of centuries.

BJ: I had no idea.

GB: I'm a huge fan of the new president of Harvard. I think she is doing a remarkable job.

BJ: That's exciting.

GB: Yeah, she's terrific.

BJ: So as I mentioned, I am in a book group. We read *March* awhile back and then recently, people picked up whatever they wanted of your stuff. But they wanted me to ask you, of the books you've written, which is your favorite?

GB: Oh, I can't do that… (Laughs). "Of your children, which is your favorite…?" (Laughs).

BJ: I know, okay. Which one did you have the most fun researching?

GB: They are all very special to me because they're a big part of your life. It takes years, and something was going on in your life at the time. So they're kind of enmeshed in memories. I would say, if you wedged me in the door and pulled out my eyelashes, that *People of the Book* was the most fun to research.

BJ: That's what I would think.

GB: Because I was able to go behind the scenes in museums and see what conservators did, and adventure around Sarajevo, and be in the room with the Sarajevo Haggadah, and go to Venice and find a little tiny bit of fact to add to the historical record about what actually happened during WWII. So yeah, I would say that that was probably the most fun to research. But they've all had something—I loved writing *Caleb's Crossing,* because it was at home, and I could just go out and walk in the woods, and I would get an idea, and I could see what she might have seen and describe it in real time. I could run home and write about that light falling on that particular plant that only grows there and at that time of year, and that was fun. With *March,* it was great fun to discover Bronson Alcott and what a fantastic guy he was. I am embarrassed that I didn't know who he was, but I know I am not alone. He is an under-appreciated figure and his thinking was so progressive for that time, so that was great fun too.

BJ: I was really struck by, in *Caleb's Crossing*, your sense of landscape, and I think it is because you were actually living there.

GB: I love it; it's a place I absolutely love.

BJ: Just gorgeous, hard to want to leave that island. As we follow Caleb and the narrator Bethia across. I think it would be heart breaking to leave this, because as a reader, you really empathize with their relationship to the landscape. So I think of all your pieces, that really comes across, that

love of the land. And when you were talking about *March*, it seems to resonate well with high school—and college—students because they have the relationship with the *Little Women*, those of us who have read *Little Women*.

GB: Well with the female half of the population—I haven't met a guy who has read *Little Women*. (Laughs).

BJ: (Laughs). Isn't it interesting, but they know the story at least. At least they have that kind of relationship.

BJ: What do you read for fun?

GB: So many, so many different kinds of things. I'm a big environmentalist, so I read a lot of books that relate to our predicament on our poor little beleaguered planet here. I've just read Bill McKibben's book *Eaarth*, which is you know by turns fascinating and enraging. And a book like *The World Without Us*—remarkable, incredibly well written. I love contemporary fiction. Also, I read a lot of things that I have to read because I just got done editing *Best American Short Stories*.

BJ: Yes, I saw that! That's awesome.

GB: I read a ton of short stories. A lot of the winter was spent on that.

BJ: Do you escape into mysteries or anything like that?

GB: In my fiction reading, I tend to like books that have a strong voice and an un-expected one. The book I loved this summer was called *The Call* by Yannick Murphy. It's in the form of a large animal vet's call-out diary, but it's really a story about family. It's brilliantly done—it's funny, it's suspenseful, and it's moving. It's everything a novel needs to be. Another one I loved this summer was *Room* by Emma Donoghue, which is told in the voice of a young child. I think when writers can captivate you with a voice like that… I thought *A Visit from the Goon Squad* was incredibly interesting, and you know kind of a radical departure, to do a fractured narrative in that way. A lot of times books that are tricksy like that, end up being less satisfying to me, but that one was absolutely satisfying because the plot and the character elucidates itself within this unconventional structure.

BJ: When you were talking I was thinking of your early interest in *Star Trek*. Do you read science fiction?

GB: Science fiction I love. It's one of those things where if you get out of that groove, it's hard to know what's good within it. I can't think of the last good one I've read.

BJ: I love *Star Trek*, but I never enjoyed reading science fiction.

GB: Some of the greatest short stories, particularly, come from science fiction.

BJ: Yes, I really like Ursula LeGuin, but that's a long time ago.

GB: Yeah, I know it's out there. I'm just trying to think…as Billy Collins says, "It's not on the tip of my tongue, it's not even buried somewhere in my liver." (Laughs). But I know I did read something in that genre that I did love recently. I think very interesting in that genre was Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*.

BJ: I read that, it was powerful.

GB: And the companion book that went with it. It flips everything that you thought you knew—very impressive. I tried to get Tony to read it, and he doesn't like science fiction.

BJ: To me she didn't fit that traditional science fiction genre, I don't know.

GB: I think that's the beauty of it. Ray Bradbury can write a profound meditation on the meaning of culture, and it's science fiction—that's the beauty of the genre, it doesn't have to just be spaceships.

BJ: Yes, right.

BJ: So I would like to go back to your own immigrant experience. Earlier you were talking about how you are American, you think of yourself as an American.

GB: And Australian, I think of myself as Australian more.

BJ: Okay.

GB: I think my instincts are very Australian. I have a sensibility that is so totally created by a political dialogue that starts so much further to the left, so that our most conservative politician would be a moderate Republican. And they're considered way out there on the right wing. So I am very much that person still in my political philosophy.

BJ: So that sense of duality…

GB: It's a funny immigrant experience, because my dad before me was an immigrant to Australia. And then I found out, okay I am a first generation immigrant. But I am also eligible for the DAR, on my father's side. Our family got to Massachusetts in 1630, in the great migration, so my American roots are very deep, and I have totally embraced that side of my life as well.

BJ: Interesting. So, do you think that's maybe why *Caleb's Crossing* and *March* appealed to you so much?

GB: I found out in the process of researching that book that my Great-Grandfather 6 back almost certainly knew Caleb. When I started that book, I thought, I am on a moral holiday with this one because I am not responsible for the dispossession of the Native Americans. I have to take responsibility for the aboriginal-Australians. And then I found out that my several-Greats-Grandfather was the brother-in-law of Elijah Corlett who prepared Caleb for Harvard. So it would have been a remarkable thing if living in the same town, he didn't drop in and say, "How are those two Indians doing."

BJ: What an amazing thing to discover. When you talk about that, because that is a period of American literature that I have studied, there is a lot of concern with the White American treatment of Native Americans. And students always encounter this, they come up against, once they read these things, they come up against this sense of guilt—the white man's guilt. Is that at all, the phrase, I don't know if this is connected, but I remember you using this phrase in *Foreign Correspondence* about this "cultural cringe" that Australians feel.

GB: Felt…

BJ: Felt—no longer. You think it's over, which is a good thing.

GB: Yeah, I think it's over.

BJ: Is that a similar kind of feeling?

GB: No, that's completely different. That was kind of a post-colonial, Stockholm-syndrome-ish thing where we were encouraged to feel that England was everything, and that we were an inferior backwater and everything that was important had come from there. One writer, and I can't remember whose idea this was but I love it, said we exported proper nouns like "copper" and "iron ore" and "wool" and "wheat." And imported… what am I talking about… and we imported abstract nouns… (Laughs).

BJ: That makes sense so things like "music" and…

GB: Right, and "art" and "literature." I didn't read, you know there were a couple of Australian children's books, but there were hardly any. I wasn't required to read a serious piece of Australian literature until I was in senior high, and by then I was completely enthralled to books from elsewhere. And that's not a bad thing; I mean being turned out to the world is very helpful. I think in a way, if I had to choose between the two evils, one is total introspection (which is often the illness in the United States—we don't raise our head to look at the world enough), or being so turned out to the world that you fail to appreciate your indigenous culture, and I think that's totally changed because of literature and the art and the movies and the music has had a complete renaissance in Australia. And not even renaissance but just emergence. And that's what people can turn to first—you don't have to turn to those imported ideas first, but that hasn't stopped Australians from being incredibly outward looking and adventurous and well traveled, and all that stuff, which is great.

BJ: In that sense I'm reminded of early American literature that was so indebted to England and Europe and led to Whitman striving for an American voice.

GB: Right, I didn't even know that Louisa May Alcott was American; I thought she was an English writer.

BJ: Right, and so much of the literature of that time period really feels British.

GB: It does yes, it feels very Victorian.

BJ: I kind of had that feeling with *Year of Wonders* too, there were times that I thought, "wait, am I in England or America?"—because in some ways it could have been either.

GB: Well, that's because everybody here at that period was essentially English. (Laughs).

BJ: Right, right.

GB: You know the people on Martha's Vineyard, who went there in 1640, didn't think of themselves as anything but English, and they thought of themselves even more specifically as Wiltshiremen. It was a long time before any American identity could emerge.

BJ: Through the course of your research for *Caleb's crossing*, and then living there now, it must be such a contrast. Because I think of Martha's Vineyard, and the map in your book, and I think of Teddy Kennedy and the Kennedy compound. I think everyone does.

GB: Well but they're not even there, that's the thing. They're mostly in Hyannis, which is a long way away. (Laughs).

BJ: So it's just in our minds…

GB: The Kennedys are over in Hyannis, but they keep coming to the Vineyard to either couple or die. You know, Teddy runs his car off the road there, and then poor old John-John puts his plane in the drink-bath.

BJ: Oh, it was there…

GB: Yeah, he was on his way to the Vineyard. His mother, it was Jackie actually, who has the real Vineyard identity. After she came home from the Onassis adventure, she bought this huge beautiful property way up island in the wildest part, where the tribe is basically, and Caroline has that now. So that's the Kennedy connection. But everyone seems to think that the Kennedy compound is there, but it's not.

BJ: So, is it your sons? I know you are concerned about the environment and what is happening, so is Martha's Vineyard really developed? I haven't been there for many years. Are they good about preserving space?

GB: You know it's better than most places. What the situation is now is, a third of the land is developed, a third of the land is in preservation, and the remaining third is up for grabs. The decisions that are made in the next ten or so years will be very important to how the character of the island…. There was a period in the 80s where there was a brief Hamptonization: people came and built McMansions—I mean beyond—real castles. I mean horrible, obtrusive, and out of character with the way the island always had been, which was understated and if you were wealthy, you did not flaunt it there. You lived in the same drafty, little, clabbered salt-boxes as everybody else on the island. Then in the 80s, that changed, but I think the pendulum has swung back. There are a couple of egregiously… um… homes that are used maybe for three weeks a year: conspicuous and wasteful and, environmentally, heavy impact. But in general, that's not the case. It's a dichotomous place: it's full of extreme wealth in the summer and then in the winter, it's one of the poorest counties, if not the poorest county in Massachusetts. So you know it's very misunderstood when people characterize it as this luxury resort. That's a very tiny part of the true identity of the island.

BJ: Hm, interesting. What are you working on these days?

GB: I just completed a series of lectures for the Australian National Broadcaster. And I am going next to Australia to deliver the first in that series. That's been really consuming, but I hope after that I will be able to get back to thinking about the new novel.

BJ: A new project, because you have been fairly prolific.

GB: It doesn't feel that way. (Laughs).

BJ: It feels that way to me, because these novels take a lot of time, I imagine.

GB: Well I am lucky because I get to write, well I wouldn't say full time, because I am kind of full-time mom as well, but I get the whole school day to write—I don't have to have another job. So, in a way I have no excuse.

BJ: So I know they always like to ask this question, and I think it is really interesting too, because I am trying to start a memoir myself. How important it is to have a routine, a ritual—do you have a routine or ritual, I am sure you do, what is it?

GB: It's called the yellow school bus. The kids go off to school and I go to work. Except on Thursdays, which I spend with my Mother. She has a senior program that she goes to, but she's 92 and, bless her heart, she has fairly advanced Alzheimer's. So 4 days a week, my writing time is defined by the school day, and I found that works really well for me. I'm ready to get up and do other things, and it's not like my kids need me to hover over them every minute, but I like to be around and accessible.

BJ: I have found, once the kids are home, it's pretty hard to get any work done anyway. And that is enough time for you?

GB: Yeah, that seems to work. If you can keep the backside glued to the chair for that amount of time, it's the necessary if the not the sufficient condition. (Laughs).

BJ: So you moved your mother over from Australia?

GB: I did yes. I used to be able to spend a good part of each year there, but when it became impossible to do that, she moved over here. She lived with us for three and a half years, and now she lives right next door.

BJ: That's great.

GB: We're lucky that we can do that. I don't know how, honestly, families manage to care for their loved ones with Alzheimer's—it's going to be a growing reality for so many people, and I don't think we've really come to grips with that.

BJ: Yeah, my Grandmother had pretty severe Alzheimer's and, fortunately, she didn't live very long in that state because she was really in a bad place.

GB: People don't want to have end-of-life decisions discussed and call it death panels. But "Hello!" it's the reality, we have a finite amount of resources, and we have to decide how best to allocate them. And it's no good. When my mom was diagnosed in Australia, we were handed a packet of what Australian medical professionals have come to the scientific conclusion as best practice. And it's not that that means that you have to go that way, you can make a different decision for your loved one, but you've got this scientific backing handed to you. And one of the things they say is that a feeding tube is not indicated for people with Alzheimer's because it will be distressing. They will not understand it, they will try to tear it out, they will fall victim to infections, and we don't recommend it. So if you decide not to go that way, it's not one of those "oh my god, I am failing my mother, I could do this," you've got this institutional backing saying, in our experience, this isn't a good idea. And that's very helpful.

BJ: That's very helpful. Even though it can seem harsh, it's realistic.

GB: I've seen my mother with a naso-gastric tube—pulling it out until she has to be restrained. I mean what is that? And then when four nurses have to re-insert it, and she's kicking—poor little thing, she's got bruises on her arm. I mean it's excruciating, because they can't understand.

BJ: In our quest for humane-ness, in the U.S., I feel that we often take things too far. We're so concerned about saving lives.

GB: Frankly, I feel that it's a malpractice issue. "If you can do it, you must do it." And that's not always the best way. I have a friend who works in the E.R. in an area that's very heavily Native American. They never see anybody over the age of 85 in the E.R. because the families don't do it. If it's an end game, it's an end game—they accept death. You're going to die, why keep somebody alive to die from something worse two months later? So they don't take people, they just nurse them and let them peacefully move on to the next thing.

BJ: I've got lots of family members who are in the medical field and have read Abraham Verghese and Atul Gawande. Have you read them?

GB: Yes, brilliant guys.

BJ: I'm so encouraged by these folks in medicine who are tackling these issues. I find them really compelling.

GB: They're real philosophers, those guys, and we need more of them. And we need them to be listened to. We need to take the politics out of it. We need to stop pretending that these aren't really hard and gut-wrenching questions.

BJ: Well thank you so much, this has been wonderful.