

I Have Some Questions For You: An Evening Discussion with Rebecca Makkai

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Rebecca Makkai and Zachary Lazar discuss Makkai's new book, *I Have Some Questions For You*.

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Rebecca Makkai, the author of this year's New York Times bestselling *I Have Some Questions for You*, as well as the novels *The Great Believers*, *The Hundred-Year House*, *The Borrower*, and the short story collection *Music for Wartime*, spoke on Nov. 6 to Tulane University students and staff.

Each year since 1985, the [Zale-Kimmerling Writer-in-Residence Program](#) has brought a distinguished woman writer to campus as a program of [Newcomb Institute](#). This year, Makkai was chosen as the Zale-Kimmerling Writer-in-Residence.

Throughout her time at Tulane, Makkai contributed to creative writing classes on campus, actively engaging with students, and took part in a Tulane University Women's Association book club meeting. Makkai also conducted a manuscript review meeting with Amy Stambaugh, offering a critical evaluation of a book that Stambaugh is working on.

Makkai's *The Great Believers* was a [finalist for the Pulitzer Prize](#) and the National Book Award, in addition to receiving the ALA Carnegie Medal and the LA Times Book Prize, among other honors.

I Have Some Questions For You, released in 2023, is a feminist boarding school mystery that centers around a film professor and podcaster, Bodie Kane, who grapples with a complicated past that she struggles to forget. When Kane is invited to teach a two-week course at The Granby School in New Hampshire, where she had previously attended boarding school, her life takes an unexpected turn.

Kane finds herself inexplicably drawn to a murder case dating back to 1995, in which her classmate, Thalia Keith, was murdered. As Kane dives deeper into the murder case and the possible wrongful conviction that followed, she wonders if she may have knowledge of her own that could help her solve the case. Kane's journey takes her on a path of self-discovery and investigation, blurring the lines between her past and the present.

"I knew the plot really before I knew who Bodie was. There's this seemingly inherent need to reverse engineer the character who is going to be the most vulnerable to circumstances and susceptible to change," Makkai said.

The narrator of *I Have Some Questions For You*, Kane, is a successful film professor and podcaster in Los Angeles. Kane's new life in L.A. contrasts deeply with her four difficult years at The Granby School. Makkai details how Kane explores her tucked-

away past and becomes aware of how she has changed over time.

“When she steps back onto this campus, she's pulled between those two poles. As she slipped back into the person she was, she was really shocked to see that she was [no longer] that same person,” Makkai said.

Makkai further elaborates on Kane and how she narrates the story. Though some readers may deem Kane as an ‘unreliable narrator,’ Makkai said that Kane is simply truthful about her fleeting memories of The Granby School, not purposely unreliable.

“I think she's being really honest. One of the things [that] she is honest about is the failures of her memory,” Makkai said.

Makkai argues that, despite having only her graduation date in common with Kane, it's still relatable to see how Kane comes to recognize her transition into adulthood.

“I think this is the book that I needed to write in my mid-40s. Like, God, a lot of time has passed. Not a ton of time, but a lot of time. You know, I still feel young, but, not that young. I need to start making sense of this,” Makkai said.



Viewers of the Rebecca Makkai lecture listen to Makkai's Q&A with Zachary Lazar.

Many pieces of the story revolve around the conviction of the man who allegedly murdered Thalia Keith. Before he was convicted, Omar was an athletic trainer at The Granby School. While Omar initially admitted to the murder, skeptics questioned the legitimacy of the conviction, and some even wondered whether it might have been driven by racial bias.

"Think about the pressure and power that a school like that could wield over local police, state police, etcetera [by] just wanting to get it solved. Omar is someone who has a very marginal role. He's not a student, he's not faculty, he's the athletic trainer, and he's staff," Makkai said.

Makkai speaks about her research before writing the novel regarding wrongful convictions, specifically in New Hampshire.

"One of the U.S. states that does not require recording of custodial interrogation [is New Hampshire], meaning that they could interrogate someone for 42 hours [while they are] falling asleep [and] saying whatever. At the end of it, you get a signed confession. And they haven't recorded any of that," Makkai said. "So the judge, the jury, [and] the public never see what went on [they only see] the confession. So, as you can imagine, there are a lot of false confessions."

Makkai explains that being a writer may entail writing pieces that don't necessarily align with your own identity.

"If you're going to write a novel, you're going to be writing across differences. It would be bananas for me to write a novel and fill it entirely with white, college-educated, 45-year-old straight women. It would be an irresponsible novel," Makkai said.

Makkai talks about one of the reasons why Omar isn't the center focus of the novel.

"I'm not the person to tell the story of what it is like to live in prison for twenty-five years. There are people out there who are telling the story and [people who] read the stories. I can write a story of someone becoming aware of what that means," Makkai said.

There are important questions to ask yourself, Makkai notes, before writing an article that deals with an unfamiliar identity.

“Am I stealing a platform or voice, or I might be amplifying other voices?” Makkai said.



Dana Zale Gerard, Martha Wells, Rebecca Makkai, Tucker Ward and Zachary Lazar listen to the introductory speaker of the evening.

Zachary Lazar, an English professor at Tulane and a fellow distinguished writer, commented on the oddity of the true-crime genre.

“It’s always been striking to me how...a staple of our entertainment is murder,” Lazar said.

“I really think it’s just evolutionary,” Makkai said.

Makkai said that the appeal of the true crime genre extends beyond mere entertainment, often prompting readers to contemplate how the story’s elements can be applied to real-life situations.

“What do I need to learn from this? Should I fix it? What do I need to learn from others’ survival?” Makkai said. “I think especially when women are consuming

stories of true crime victims. There's a lot of like, 'I could find myself in a similar situation.'"

Tucker Ward, a freshman at Tulane University and an avid reader, introduced Makkai at her lecture.

"At its heart, the book is not a true crime story. To me, it's the story of a woman, and it's the story of how women are expected to live in the world," Ward said.

Makkai teases that she already has another novel in the works.

"The next thing I'm writing is set in 1938," Makkai said. "And then the thing I'm writing after that is going to be set now, but of course, what now is, two books from now, who knows ."