Announcer: Featuring graduates from the Humber School for Writers who have lived extraordinary lives and who've brought those experiences into their work. This is Love and Defiance.

David Bezmozgis: Part of the way I identify students for the podcast is by their application letters. I'll read some selections from Tendisai's letter.

"In this program I intend to produce the first draft of a literary nonfiction manuscript about my evolving relationship to Islam as an African-Caribbean Muslim woman who converted as an adult. I wish to take the reader on a journey towards understanding the tensions and harmonies that exist between my faith identity and my Canadian identity. I'll situate my experiences in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia, increased Islamist attacks, and a global spirit of antiestablishmentism in movements such as Black Lives Matter. I also intend to explore how my other, most salient identities, blackness and womanhood, fit into the larger experience of being Muslim in the west. In this exploration that begins with my conversion, I'll include relevant aspects of my life that have invited reflection on faith, whether it be finding myself in a West Bank bar amid secular Palestinians that hold contempt for religion, or negotiating prayer in the workplace. This personal narrative will ultimately be a meditation on belonging, and about the ability to cultivate cultural confidence, spiritual resiliency, and even a sense of optimism in challenging times."

Do you recognize yourself in that?

Tendisai Cromwell: I do, but now…yeah, that's very different from what I would…yeah, I wouldn't write that kind of book now. I feel disassociated from that.

DB: So what's the difference? What's changed in the last couple years?

TC: I think, now I want to explore these topics through fiction rather than nonfiction. I want it to be less personal, less connected to my own lived experience. And I think it's all over the place. I wanted to put everything into one book, and I think now I'm not interested in bringing people into necessarily my individual world, but exploring the life of other people by looking at things in a maybe more complicated way.

DB: Well, it seems like even during the course of the program, you changed what you ended up doing, right?

TC: Yes, yes.

DB: So something changed even much faster than what we're talking about now, even from the point when you composed this letter, to, at some point within the program, you changed what you were gonna write.

TC: That's right. I think I wrote the first two chapters of the nonfiction manuscript, and then I said, "No, I'd much prefer writing a novel," which has been a lifelong kind of dream of mine, to produce a novel. Since I was 18, I've been writing since well before that, but at 18 I was like, "I'm gonna write a novel." And the I also felt very uncomfortable with the idea of just putting my life out there. I didn't want to be open to

interrogation. I didn't want to be…I feel very strange about the idea of putting my life out there. So I said, "You know what, it's safer to do the novel too." There's a little bit of that as well. But yeah, I felt I could, maybe even more honestly, explore some of these same issues through fiction, through fictional characters rather than putting myself in the story.

DB: So maybe we can just back up a touch, and you could talk about where you come from, and where you are right now, like your upbringing, and your reason for making a pretty significant change.

TC: Sure. You're talking about the conversion…

DB: Yeah, yeah, I'm talking about it, yeah.

TC: Yeah, so I was born in Zimbabwe. My dad's Trinidadian, my mom's Zimbabwean. He actually was born in Trinidad, and he migrated to Canada first in the 70's, and then had a whole other life, a whole other family, a whole Canadian immigrant experience before I was even born, then migrated to Zimbabwe when it was newly decolonized, because I think there was an effort to bring a lot of Caribbean folks and black folks from the diaspora to come and, in a sense, help contribute to this new free nation. So while he was there working at a technical institute, he met my mother, and the rest is history. I was born there, my sister was born there, I have a brother on my mother's side, and we then, five years later, migrated to Canada, living in Ajax, where I was raised.

I grew up Christian, nominally. I didn't really ascribe to any particular religious practice until I was 18. It was around that time that I started to, not reengage, but actually engage with spiritual ideas, religious ideas. I explored Buddhism, and I explored various Christian sects, and it wasn't speaking to me in any way, and so I kind of abandoned the notion of faith for a little while, and then I went to university, and in a philosophy class, I met a young Sudanese man, and his mind intrigued me. He was just someone who was really deeply intellectual. We would have this philosophical debate, he beat me, I was really just impressed by him, before I even knew his name, I was like, "Who is this guy?"

So I asked him point blank, I'm like, "Who are you?" It didn't make sense to me, the kind of man he was, because he just exuded a kind of wisdom, and when you're 18, I'd never met a man like him with such a mind. And then he told me that his sole pursuit in life was just to become a better person of faith, and I'm like, "Faith?" And I'm like, "What religion?" He's like, "I'm Muslim." I'm like, "Oh, you guys worship all those gods?" Like I thought it was Hinduism. I didn't know much about Islam at all. But when I met him, I became deeply fascinated by it, so I asked him to teach me about the faith, and he did, and then I converted very quickly.

DB: How quickly? So you're saying, first year of university you met this guy…

TC: Yeah, yeah.

DB: …and then how long thereafter did you convert?

TC: I'm gonna say it was within three months.

DB: And what does that mean, to convert at that point? What did you have to do?

TC: It's simply saying what we call the Shahadah, which is just the testimony of faith. It's just repeating words that, you believe in God, you believe in his messenger. You'd think converting involves some, just a lot of, something momentous, but it was literally over the phone, and I didn't feel any different after I said it. It was just an ordinary fall day.

DB: So what happens after that?

TC: What happened before was I was learning about the faith. I was learning things like how to pray, and the positions that we pray in. I was learning the minimal amount of Arabic I would need to be able to make my prayers. I was reading the text. I started to cover a lot more. And just abandoning some of the things I was doing in my teenage years. I lived a lot more, I don't want to say cleaner, but I was a lot more conservative in the things I chose to do.

DB: Modest.

TC: Yeah, modest.

DB: So what was it about Islam, then, that appealed to you? What was it that you connected to?

TC: It was him, and I did end up falling in love with him, obviously, that was bound to happen, but I think he had just a really beautiful character. His way of speaking, his ideas, how deeply intellectual he was, how respectful he was of me as a woman. I'd never encountered someone…I was like, "If this faith can make a man like this, it's something I want to become too." I was really moved by his spiritual insights, and I wanted to be that person too. And so he would teach me lessons from the prophet's sayings that resonated with me. I started to think beyond myself. I would think more deeply about how I'm connected to the rest of humanity. I thought more deeply about nature, and about, in Islam you're looking at the stars and the animals, and people around you, it's supposed to be a sign of the creation, of the existence of God.

So those reflections for an 18 year old mind, that moment was just really speaking to me, and I felt part of something whole, I felt like part of a unified whole. There was God, and I was a part of that, and I'd never felt that before. And yeah, just rituals. I never grew up with a lot of rituals and traditions, and so doing Islamic rituals and practices with other people in a collective way, it built a sense of community for me that I needed, a spiritual community. And then tapping into scholars, you wouldn't believe, young 18 year olds studying scholars from, I don't know, the 15th, 16th century, we would do that with my friends and then go out and listen to hip-hop and have tea. We'd be talking about different scholars *(laughs)*, and with the same breath talking about Biggie Smalls or

something. *(laughs)* I just loved it, I loved it, a lot of moments of quiet reflection that you wouldn't typically get in the world.

So I'll read an excerpt from my manuscript, tentatively titled *The Common Believer*. This is chapter one.

She thought religion ought to be quiet. Not a secular quiet, sequestered in the privacy of one's home, but a spiritual quietness, the quality of prayer before sunrise that over time transforms self and society. Amal thought this as she watched the news on the café television. Two days earlier, Islamist terrorists with Dutch passports planted a bomb in an open-air Berlin market, killing 20 people, including a pregnant woman and her two children. And with the little bit of Arabic that she understood, she overheard a man in the back shout, "Those animals!" to the terrorists on the screen. She closed her eyes and made two prayers. One for the victims, the other for future victims of reprisal attacks. Ordinary Muslims. Amal shifted her gaze away from the TV and towards her phone. She was conscious of time. It was nearing sunset prayer, but Khalid, the owner, always let her pray in the back. They had an understanding. Marrakech Café quickly became her and Asya's favorite spot in the city, a place they had dubbed "The Usual Suspect," because each knew that the other would likely be there if they weren't at home. It was also the sole shisha café in town that was known to still use real tobacco, defying a citywide ban, a fact that made Asya very happy. As usual, Asya was running late. Amal, in one of her reflective moods, decided to smoke alone. Drawing in and exhaling the strong apple flavor created deeper, more uncomfortable, yet entirely welcome thoughts and feelings. Her phone beeped thrice.

"Sorry bro, class ran late. I'll be there soon, inshallah."

Amal didn't mind. She enjoyed moments of indulging in various thoughts, embracing a kind of heaviness in spirit, because, when Asya arrived, as it always did, the mood would change. Amal thought religion ought to be quiet. She thought this as she rose from her seat, purse in hand, as she walked past groups of older men speaking in Arabic or Somali, who perhaps should've been home with their wives and children. She walked past Khalid, who nodded and smiled, and passed the cash register to the back storage area. A well-used torso-size prayer rug lay on the concrete floor near dusty boxes. It was a cheaply-woven made-in-China variety with multi-colored patterns, the kind of rug ubiquitous in every praying Muslim's home, every mosque, every place where heads are lowered to the floor in Allah's name.

DB: That's lovely.

TC: Thank you.

DB: Thank you.

TC: The very first line of this, "She thought religion ought to be quiet," I wrote that years before, alone. It was in a Word document, and I wrote that probably because I saw some news of a terrorist attack, and I was feeling that at that very moment. And then, in a moment of inspiration, I wrote that, and I was like, "You know, this is gonna be in some novel I write some day."

I guess at the time, when I wrote it, it really spoke to the need for spirituality to be at the heart of faith rather than sort of this dogmatic and almost sort of angry orientation that sometimes Islam is perceived to be, and sometimes actually is taken on by many of its believers. And I wanted to bring that kind of sentiment that I have into at least one of the characters that I would eventually write, which would come to be Amal many years later. It was easy to write Amal, because Amal in many ways was or is me and a composite of other people that I know.

But Amal is a character who reminds me of so many other women besides myself who are going through life, living in Toronto, quietly believe in their faith, practice it to the best of their abilities, and it's hidden. It's a quiet faith. It's beautiful, it's imperfect, it's flawed, but it's theirs. And I feel like when people write about faith or characters that are religious, it lacks that quality, the quietness, it's always very overt or they're victims or there's something really political about it, a lot of identity politics infuse in it that doesn't necessarily reflect how people actually go about their day living their lives as people of faith, I guess.

DB: So that's a good question, the idea of taking on a faith that, at a point in time, post-9/11, all of a sudden is much more prominent sort of in the mass culture, there's an awareness of Islam and a perception of what that faith is and how it acts in the world, or its adherents act in the world. I wonder how that decision then was received by your family.

TC: Yeah. I mean, I think in terms of conversion, I'm not unique. There were so many people converting to Islam post-9/11. I might be incorrect, but I think there was an increase in conversion somehow, among women in particular, I think. So I was one of the many women to, here and in the U.K. and parts of the States, that were converting to Islam, presumably for the same reason I converted. Maybe they were researching it, or they come across a man. In a lot of cases men are the first introduction to the faith, and they might be looking at a time when they needed answers that maybe society wasn't able to provide, in a way that resonated with them.

But my family, my parents are just really chill and kind of laissez-faire, like whatever, but my mom was not happy that I wanted to cover. Because I used to wear the hijab more traditionally. She was very upset about that. She's like, "Practice your faith, but why do you need to cover? That's not something that's necessary for you to be a good believer." She believes it's oppressive, my mom's like a tennis-playing woman who wears short skirts sometimes. I don't know how to describe it, but she's just an average woman here. So she didn't appreciate the hijab thing, but she didn't fight me for too long. There were times when we had these passionate debates. But that didn't last very long. My dad's very passive. He's like, "OK." *(laughs)* The rest of my family were just pretty chill about it.

DB: So you're 18 years old, you convert, you and the man who intrigued you or got you interested in Islam, at some point you guys are no longer together?

TC: Yeah, yeah.

DB: But you continue on…

TC: I continue on.

DB: Because you discover it's not just about him.

TC: It wasn't about him.

DB: Yeah. And so, OK, at what point is he, does he leave the picture and you move on?

TC: Oh, probably a few months later. He leaves school. He becomes very religious, to the point where he doesn't feel that he needs to interact with women anymore. I continued to go through school. I started to shed my black identity, unfortunately, in favor of a more Arabized kind of orientation of faith, and then I started to fold all of these different Muslim cultures and languages and poetry and lands into my own sense of self, and so then I decided I want to go study Arabic and live in Egypt and be in Cairo. I want to just breathe that. And I did. I eventually went to study Arabic with one of my best friends at the time, this really funny, irreverent Algerian girl, who actually Asya's kind of based on a little bit. We went to Egypt together in a program. She already knew Arabic but she didn't know classical, Koranic Arabic, so we studied there, had a fun time in Cairo. Then we went and took a bus to the border between Egypt and Israel and entered there. Horrific interrogation for many hours. Got in, though, they let us in, for ten days.

I wanted to challenge my assumptions or my beliefs. When you inherit this religion, you also inherit all these political positions. I immediately became pro-Palestinian, despite not really knowing much about the region. I took the extra step of reading Herzl, downloading some of the U.N. papers, so I did a lot of research, like "This seems unjust." Despite that, I still wanted to go there and be like, "I want to be a silent observer, I don't want to just think I know everything." So I went there just to challenge my views. It actually ended up affirming a lot of my views, but also making Israeli society a lot more complex and not this strange, evil place. But it reaffirmed a lot of my beliefs, and I decided to go back the following year, 2008, as an advocacy journalist, so I was there for close to two months, based in Ramallah, and also East Jerusalem.

DB: OK, so what was that experience like?

TC: There's so many layers, because the biggest thing for me was, OK, I'm black, I'm ambiguously black, how are people gonna treat me in both societies? And I was very concerned about that. And then when I went there, I discovered there are many different black groups there, and they're all treated quite poorly on all sides. I don't know if I made total sense there, because you clearly see me, people always assumed I was American, and so I didn't fit into any one group, but blackness wasn't foreign to that land.

But there were a few incidents of racism, obviously, but a lot less than I had thought, and it was very strange from that perspective, but also beautiful to see that there are other people who are from my continent. Then the Islam thing, at the time I wasn't

wearing the scarf at all, but faith was still a very important part of my life, so on the Israeli side, it wasn't really challenging for me to be on the Israeli side. But it was so apparent, the separation between the Arab Israelis and Palestinians that were there, and the Jewish Israeli population and then there's other groups, the Druze…

DB: Christians…

TC: The Christians, sorry, the Christians…

DB: Well, Druze too.

TC: Druze too, but Christians of all sorts. And the guns, with the soldiers walking around, that was very strange for me, but also, it's just a beautiful land of so much history, and I don't know, there were so many moments that even Toronto couldn't inspire. Just that feeling of being in a place that's deeply connected to a feeling that I have, and also you could walk around the side and every part of East Jerusalem is so connected to a deep history, and it was so beautiful in so many ways.

And then on the Palestinian side, going through the checkpoints was really incredibly challenging to experience. A very dehumanizing experience. I don't know how to describe it. I have a hard time talking about that. I fell into a really cool group of artsy Palestinians that were really hip and interesting, that challenged me on every possible level. I went to parties with them. It was really fun, actually, a lot of the time, and then for them to talk about their lives under occupation, I didn't conceive that I could

experience something as fun as a cool hipsters party in Ramallah, in a place that's occupied like that.

I still haven't figured out what that experience did for me. I don't understand what I've done to that memory. I think about it a lot, but I don't know how to make sense of all the things on a spiritual level, a political level.

DB: You've just described a part of your experience that you feel like you can't quite process yet, and can't quite write about. So how do you choose, for this novel, what did you choose to be able to write about, what were those things when you were sitting down to write?

TC: I mean, I think there's the broad categories, the social identities of race, gender, faith, and then you filter it down, and it's the small things. This book doesn't just deal with blackness. She's actually mixed between Sudanese and Jamaican, and you'll see that tension emerging as the book unfolds, between her father being from Sudan and her mother being from Jamaica, and despite both being black and sharing that, there's a superiority complex on her dad's side, who ends up leaving the mother, goes back to Khartoum, gets a second wife, and the mom's abandoned, she becomes a single mother left in low-income housing, public housing in Toronto.

So there's that, that kind of emerges as a tension within the black experience that she has, and then I also wanted to show the Muslim woman, there's an image, it's actually been challenged a lot now. You'll see a diversity of expressions of Muslim womanhood. But I wanted to show this very spiritual, calm, religious woman with her

friend who wears the hijab, but she's wild, she's irreverent, she doesn't really care, she's kind of apolitical, and I wanted to show the juxtaposition between two types of Muslim womanhood in Toronto. And so I wanted to explore that.

DB: I wonder if it's fair to say, I think in my experience it's probably true, but one writes the book that doesn't exist.

TC: Exactly.

DB: Did you feel, when you sat down to the write this, it's like, "OK, this is what I want to show that I don't believe is out there"?

TC: Yes.

DB: So what is that, if you could explain what that would be?

TC: Yes. I resisted the temptation to say the cliché, like, "I wanted to write the book that I've never read."

DB: But I think that's the case, because otherwise…

TC: A hundred percent.

DB: …otherwise don't sit down to write.

TC: Don't sit down to write. But no, I think it's OK to write things that have been done, but maybe doing it better, or doing it slightly different, right?

DB: Right.

TC: So I think for me, I have to write. Writing is not a choice for me. It's something I have to do to live. To borrow a phrase from this writer I love, Kiese Laymon, he says, "How does one become better at being human?" Writing for me is becoming better at being human. I only discover the deeper parts of myself when I put pen to pad, or I'm typing. If I don't write, I'm not me, and so I needed to write. And now, writing this novel and writing it for public consumption is another story. My motivations were a little bit different. It was to be able to share, hopefully, a more nuanced understanding of Muslim womanhood in Toronto, and what that looks like. I felt like I, and some of my other writer friends, are gonna be contributing to that in the next 5-10 years. I think there are some good books coming out, and I wanted to be part of that.

Fundamentally, I just have such a profound respect for the future reader, because if you're gonna sit through a 300-page book, it better feel like a cup of tea with me on a Sunday morning, because I want to engage in this conversation with this reader, and I want them to enjoy this text, and I'm always thinking about, who will read my text? I want it to be very much a pleasurable experience, and challenging, and all the other things too, but ultimately I want them to read every sentence and appreciate it.

DB: In reading the part that I've been able to read from your book, the excerpt, at the level of the line, we talked about it before, there's a clear sophistication in choices that the writer's making. But also, tonally, some parts are very funny, some parts are contemplative and ruminative, as you read at the beginning, thinking about what faith means, but the register moves and changes…

TC: It has to.

DB: …and I think the humor and the sense of close observation. In terms of humor, is that something, usually it's something that's inside the writer, that's just the way you see the world. But is that something that you're aware of, that you're like, "OK, let's introduce some humor into this"?

TC: I'm always laughing. I love humor. I feel that my tendency, when I was a lot younger, was to write in a way that I didn't really experience the world. A lot of my world involves a great deal of humor. The tone of the first, of my excerpt, is typically how I'd write throughout, if I wrote a story, anything. And initially when I was writing the novel, that's how I had envisioned I would write it, very heavy. But then, there was a point at which I said, no, if I'm introducing many characters, and I'm trying to be true to lived experiences of people in this society, Muslims in this society, there is so much

humor in our community. It's in many ways how people cope with the tragedy that is this life, honestly. And I said, if I'm gonna be truthful, there needs to be humor.

And then people who read this book who were Muslims, or read excerpts of it, they're like, "I know Asya." That irreverent, loud, funny, Hijabi, who swears and who is completely what you wouldn't expect. So I had to put her, there was no way I couldn't put Asya in, because she's so many Muslim women that I know and love.

DB: Yeah, I think in talking about any community or just the world, to say this idea of you're gonna introduce humor, when I find a book that has no humor, to me it's like somebody has subtracted humor.

TC: Exactly.

DB: It's the opposite.

TC: It's the opposite.

DB: Anybody who goes through life, bizarre, funny, ridiculous things happen all the time, including to people who you think are…

TC: Humorless. *(laughs)*

DB: …upright and humorless.

TC: Exactly. It's almost like an effort to not include humor when it already exists in so many of our lives, right? Yeah. That's exactly it.

DB: And especially in writing about religion or faith, it's the difference between, we were talking about it a little bit, piety and piousness. And maybe you can talk about what that means to you, the sense of writing about piety and then not writing in a pious way, if you know what I mean.

TC: I initially thought it would have a particular tone, a particular approach, where I would actually want to ensure that people would leave this text having a deep appreciation for the complexity of Muslim womanhood, all their glory, their intelligence, their piousness, and that all the flaws of being a person of faith would be removed. That's what I intentionally had wanted to write, and it felt very disingenuous, and again, I needed to be, there was an honesty I needed to have with myself, and appreciate also the reader, and give them a book with flawed characters, a book of complexity.

But in terms of, I do have some personal tensions with, how far do I go with it? Because I am still someone who is observant of my faith. When I'm going to write about things like sex and relationships and other things, what will I allow myself to write, and what are the boundaries that I set for myself? And I still haven't figured it out yet. Even the tension behind it, do I know this is gonna play well with a mainstream audience, if I write about this Muslim woman, Asya, who takes off her hijab and starts running around and sleeping with men? Even though that is true to people's lived experience, what am I

playing into when I do that? Do I bring the character back? I have to think about those things, and I don't know yet how to reconcile all those things.

DB: So how do you know if what you've written is true or false?

TC: True or false?

DB: Yeah, like…well, I'm asking you it in relation to what you just said. So, if internally to you, what you're writing is true…

TC: Yeah.

DB: …then, if somebody else from the outside comes in and says, "Well, I totally disagree with that, I'm deeply offended," you should be able to say, "No no, this is true as I see the world." And then if you've done that work, then no matter what comes to you after that from the outside…people are always going to…

TC: They're always gonna engage with it from their perspective.

DB: Yeah, not everybody's gonna agree.

TC: And that's fine.

DB: From my experience, it's like, write a sentence, make an enemy. That's basically how I feel.

TC: That's exactly it. And that's OK, I expect that. You're writing about things like Islam, of course, I expect a lot of people criticizing the book, if it ever gets to that level. I think for me, it's about ideas around self-censorship, and will this thing, this character or what I allowed them to do, does it reflect my overall spiritual values? Is it even important that they do? Does that somehow sacrifice, am I gonna sacrifice truth in favor of a certain kind of ethical approach to the text? I don't know. And I'll probably end up just choosing truth and realness over my own values.

But every writer has their limits. There are areas and places where every writer won't go, because they have their ethical boundaries, whether or not it even reflects the world. There are so few writers that touch on some very taboo subjects, and I actually appreciate that, just don't go there. So maybe my boundaries are tighter, and they're smaller, and I'm wondering how wide I should make them. So it's a constant tension within myself, and I don't think it'll ever be resolved. I can still write this book in a particular way, and maybe I'll put it out in the world in a way that's imperfect, that doesn't perfectly align with my values, and maybe that's fine, or maybe I'll put that book out that aligns with my values and sacrifice a bit of truth. I don't know yet, but we'll see how it starts to shape up.

Announcer: On the next episode of Love and Defiance, we'll be talking with David Albertyn, about using personal experience to find your own voice, and how to prepare for a new kind of challenge: success.