

## Episode 96, Patricia Raybon, Writing as Ministry: Engaging the Intersection of Faith and Race

**Intro** [00:00:04] Welcome to engage 360 Denver Seminary's Podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

**Don Payne** [00:00:16] Friends welcome again to engage 360. We're coming to you from Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne, your host. And this week again, we've got a really interesting guest. But let me set our conversation up this way. In his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, author Thomas Cahill argues that monks in the first millennium actually saved civilization, at least Western civilization as we know it, by protecting and preserving manuscripts, including biblical manuscripts, manuscripts that have been foundational for modern Western culture. And that speaks to the power of the written word that the tentacles of that influence are really hard to measure, I think. So, whether you consider yourself a reader or a casual reader or an avid reader, we are all influenced far more than we know by the written word. And so, we are honored and privileged in this episode to visit with someone who knows that very deeply because she is an accomplished author and teacher of writing. Patricia Raybon. Patricia, welcome.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:01:31] I'm delighted to be here with you today at Denver Seminary. It's been a while, and I'm happy to be here.

**Don Payne** [00:01:37] Oh, we're so glad you're here. But in addition to her many other accomplishments, Patricia served for a while on the Denver Seminary Board of Trustees. And we're really grateful for what you invested in our community during that season. Thank you for that.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:01:51] Thank you.

**Don Payne** [00:01:52] Patricia actually retired as associate professor of journalism from the University of Colorado, and her work or essays, and many, many works have been published in the *New York Times Magazine* and *Newsweek* and *USA Today*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and a number of other places. They have been featured in *National Public Radio's Weekend Edition*. In addition to her many essays, she is also the author of a number of books such as *I Told The Mountain to Move*, *Learning to Pray So Things Change*, *My first white friend confessions on race, love and forgiveness*, *undivided a Muslim daughter*, *her Christian mother*, and *their path to peace*. And most recently, a mystery novel entitled *All That Is Secret*, which is kind of a new direction for you, I think. Right?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:02:47] Fiction; totally new for me. And it's exciting for me to even say that, Don, to even place myself in that bucket and call myself a novelist. I'm surprised about that.

**Don Payne** [00:03:07] So tell us a little bit, Patricia, about that shift. What, after all that you've written, what prompted you to move in that direction?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:03:17] Two things. I love story, I love fiction. And we had a pandemic and all of us learned things during that time, that pandemic year of 2020 in particular. And what I learned is that there was no reason to be afraid to try something new. So that summer I was with my husband at home, isolated, vaccinated, all those things. And I said

to him, What would you think if I tried to finish a mystery that I had started working on several years ago? But during the pandemic, it seemed like if I was going to try something new, this would be the moment to do it.

**Don Payne** [00:04:14] So this wasn't actually brand new. It had roots back, you said you had worked on it some time ago, and you kind of returned to that.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:04:25] I love the genre and in particular, I love clergy mysteries.

**Don Payne** [00:04:32] Okay.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:04:33] And so in addition to enjoying them, I had started buying and reading books on how to write fiction many years because I, as a professional writer and a teacher of writer, I love all writing formats. And fiction was something that I thought at some point I wanted to try. I wasn't sure that I could do it, but I wanted to see if I tried it, what would come of it? Not much. So, I put it on a shelf. But there was something, Don, something about that pandemic summer that said that the big threat was this deadly virus. And that I had no excuse not to try to do something that might frighten me, but my invitation was to lean into it and see what happened.

**Don Payne** [00:05:32] I really admire your courage and your faith exhibited in that, because what I'm hearing in your description is that this is far more than that kind of broad-based sentiment that you hear so often is, I want to write a novel, you know, I want to write World's Greatest Novel. You hear that a lot. But this was really an exercise of faith and courage for you in many ways. Right?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:06:01] There's always in any kind of published writing the possibility that somebody's going to criticize it and won't like it. And that's certainly true in the world of fiction. But I gave that fear to God and sat down at my keyboard and got to work. And I remember telling my husband, Dan, nothing may come of this, but what matters more is that I'm giving it a try. And sure enough, now I have an agent, and he sold it quickly to a Tyndale house fiction. Their fiction division. And the book was released the fall of 2021.

**Don Payne** [00:06:56] Well, congratulations.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:06:58] Thank you.

**Don Payne** [00:06:59] And as we go along today, I want to talk a little bit about that book, your mystery novel, as well as writing in general. While you were making your comments about that process, I was kind of smiling inside when you mentioned that the great risk is that someone's going to read it and criticize it. And I'm thinking from the kind of writing, limited as it has been, for me, the great risk is that somebody will even read it at all. Other than my parents and friends, and when my friends read my stuff, all I get from them is "there's way too many footnotes, you know, what's with all the Footnotes?"

**Patricia Raybon** [00:07:37] Always critics.

**Don Payne** [00:07:38] Yeah, always critics if they read it at all. Right? Where do we start? Why do you write? Why have you given yourself and your career to writing?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:07:53] I'm sure it has to do with my background. Some of your listeners may know that I am a woman of color. I grew up under Jim Crow segregation

before the Civil Rights Act was passed, before the Voting Rights Act, before the Fair Housing Act, and remember in first person ways, the insult of that experience. And it just required of me to think about what was happening, what was it about me and how people defined me that alarmed them so much and required them to make laws that constrained where my family could go and live and have our being. And so, the place where I found a way to examine all of that was with words. I often think, Don, that if that had not been my experience, would I have landed in some other field, some other career. I don't know, but I'm grateful for it because it's given me a way to think on paper about what I experienced and not just that, but to also then think about how it connects to my faith. So that's the intersection for me in terms of my writing; faith and race.

**Don Payne** [00:09:32] Yeah. I want to probe a little more into that. Before we do, I just want to thank you for how you chronicled that in your book, *My First White Friend*, which I read some years ago and was very moved by that. You grew up in the Denver suburb of North Glen, right? And I latched onto that because I, when I was a teenager, lived in the neighboring suburb of Thornton.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:10:00] I went to high school in Thornton

**Don Payne** [00:10:03] Thornton high school? Oh, did you really? Okay.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:10:05] Merritt Hutton was the name at that time.

**Don Payne** [00:10:07] Yes, I remember that. I remember that.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:10:09] Yes.

**Don Payne** [00:10:11] That was just an inviting story. A gripping, gripping story.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:10:19] Well, it's a narrative. The race narrative is one that some people, for some reason, don't want others to think about and wrestle over. But it is the American narrative.

**Don Payne** [00:10:36] Yeah, it is.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:10:37] And so I found permission in my faith and in the storytelling nature of the Bible to sit down and write my own stories as they related to, you know, those areas, faith and race. And so that's where I have labored all these years and have been grateful to find answers and encouragement, but also to feel comfortable not always understanding everything that's happening. I was thinking about it today coming over here. We've been in a hard season this past couple of years. And, politically and socially, it's not clear where we're going to go, where we're going to land, but the promise of the story is that at some point there will be in that journey a resolution and some answers. And I was telling somebody the other night, writing has never felt to me like work. You know, I worked for a dozen years at the Denver Post as a news reporter. I worked at the old Scripps Howard newspaper as a reporter. I taught journalism for 15 years up at the University of Colorado at Boulder. And none of it has really ever felt like work. It's something I feel privileged to do.

**Don Payne** [00:12:26] You remind me in saying that of an experience I had many years ago when I was in undergrad, I took a course in creative writing and read a little book called *Sweet Agony* by Gene Olson. And one of the few things I remember is a comment

he made in the book that he, as a writer, did not enjoy writing. He said he enjoyed having written. You've probably heard that. That sounds like that's not as true for you. You really enjoy the process of writing.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:12:56] I love the process and probably because I don't thoroughly understand how God manifests everything that happens in it, my obligation is to sit down and do it. Somebody asked me the other night, I was at a book club, and the question was, do you ever have writer's block? And my answer was, there's not room in my life and this work that I've been given to have something called writer's block. This is my job. And I have to go and sit down and do it. I'm not waiting for a muse to arrive. I just finished, for example, 1500-word reflection on humility for our daily bread ministry.

**Don Payne** [00:14:02] Okay.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:14:03] That will probably run. They usually work about a year ahead, so we'll probably run somewhere in about a year. And so, when I get to a place where I'm not sure what to say next, I will physically move from the keyboard, go downstairs, wash dishes, take a walk or something until that next idea that's waiting for me to discover it can come sailing in.

**Don Payne** [00:14:33] Okay.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:14:35] But the idea of being blocked, there's no place in my day to day work to indulge that.

**Don Payne** [00:14:47] I really like the way you put that, because I guess it is a sort of self-indulgence or can be.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:14:52] Probably.

**Don Payne** [00:14:52] In that way to throw oneself back on writer's block. You simply do it.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:14:58] You have to do the work.

**Don Payne** [00:14:59] You do the work, and you evidently know the kinds of things you need to do so that the work can come. The work can flow. The next idea comes.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:15:13] The creative impulse can look like some kind of magic. But it rests more on some kind of discipline.

**Don Payne** [00:15:29] Okay. That's what a lot of us need to hear.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:15:32] So if I'm stuck, then I need to do some more research. Talk to some person who has some information. Look at a piece of writing that's like the kind that I'm trying to do. Something that moves me forward into the next place that I need to be to do the work.

**Don Payne** [00:15:54] Well, I think those are the marks of a true craftsperson, a true artisan, that you've learned the disciplines of excellence. You've learned the disciplines to carry you through the tough spots, to find your way through the tough spots, rather than waiting on the muse or the magic.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:16:08] Right. Right.

**Don Payne** [00:16:10] Yeah.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:16:10] I enjoyed basketball. I'll just say this. We've been watching, well, my husband, I love basketball. And Steph Curry the other night had a great night. I'm not sure when this tape will run, but at this particular night, I think he scored 43 points.

**Don Payne** [00:16:28] In the NBA finals. Yeah.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:16:31] And so I enjoyed that because he has said in his, he teaches a master class and some other things and he's often asked, how can you keep making those shots? And his answer is I go to the gym, you know. And if those are the kind of shots you want to make, get to the gym.

**Don Payne** [00:16:55] Yeah. It's reminiscent of Malcolm Gladwell's principle of 10000 hours. Right.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:17:02] Precisely.

**Don Payne** [00:17:03] Yeah.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:17:03] Get cracking.

**Don Payne** [00:17:05] Just get to work on it and develop the disciplines and the finesse. Let's talk about your most recent book, your mystery novel, All That Is Secret. I was captivated even by the prologue to this, partly because it's set as a Western. I don't know that the whole story is what you'd call a Western, but it starts out set in the West in Colorado back then. And I love Westerns. Big fan of Elmore Shelton's work and I love those. But you've taken this in an interesting and maybe unique direction because this mystery novel seems to be creating a space where those intersections of race and justice and culture and mystery and intrigue and all of that kind of come together. Tell us about that.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:17:58] Well the novel features a young black theologian who is called home to Colorado. She's working a Bible college in Chicago and gets a cryptic telegram to come back to Colorado and help solve the mystery of the murder of her estranged father.

**Don Payne** [00:18:29] Joe Spain.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:18:30] Joe Spain. Her name is Annalee Spain, Professor Annalee Spain. And this happens in 1924, during the time in Colorado when the Ku Klux Klan ruled the roost politically and socially.

**Don Payne** [00:18:49] I think a lot of people in Colorado don't associate that kind of thing with Colorado, but that's part of the Colorado narrative. It really is.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:18:56] Part of our history. So, it's not a slave narrative because of the time that it's set, but there are a lot of good slave narratives. But I wanted instead to look at the life, I wanted to put a face on a young woman of color who was trying to figure out her life and her faith and her place in a space of prejudice and bigotry during that time, but while she's trying to solve a mystery. So, it was important to me to not just write about the

struggle of a young woman during the time of the Klan years, but to make it an entertainment by making it a mystery. And that made it exciting for me to write, and I hope exciting for people to read.

**Don Payne** [00:20:05] Well, if what I've read so far is an indicator, it will be. So I would highly recommend this work. And I think it just hit the shelf in October, you said, of this past year of 21.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:20:17] Right. Last fall. I know that this was something new for me, but I believed, I guess that's the best way to say it, Don. I believed that there could be a way for people who aren't young and black and female to identify with the protagonist. And I love to watch that happen. In fact, you know, I spent a lot of time, as you mentioned, writing about race and faith and have had a lot of pushback on things that I've written. So, it's been exciting for me to see people who may push back on some of my nonfiction work to be willing to read a whole novel about this young black woman trying to solve a mystery because all of us want to know who did it. How does it turn out? You know, that's the.

**Don Payne** [00:21:25] The universal sentiment, in some ways, the whodunit.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:21:28] Whodunit. And so that keeps people reading.

**Don Payne** [00:21:33] You caught my attention with a comment you just made about this not being, the significance of this not being restricted to a young woman of color in those kinds of circumstances. What other kinds of implications do you think this might have? How would this extend into other life circumstance, do you think?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:21:57] Well, based on what I'm hearing at book club meetings, I've been blessed to attend and meet with many book clubs who are enjoying this book. And what I'm observing is how it is inviting people to identify with this character, but to then take the risk and examine their own history with race and faith. And look at how they might have been shaped by those things. So, in a book club the other night with ten or 12 women who all were white, the conversation wasn't just about the novel, but about the places where they grew up and how the narratives around race that they heard defined how they thought about themselves, about people of color, and what America is. Well, that was the, I shouldn't call it the work, but that was the position of Ku Klux Klan. You know, they positioned themselves as a law-and-order organization during a time when people were trying to figure out who is an American and are our values being threatened. And so the Klan leaned into that and said, We are American if you're white and you're Protestant. Some people call it if you're legacy American, then you are. If you're not, then you don't belong. And so, people in the book club were talking about how they wrestled with that message in their own lives. So, you know, a fictional story can invite us to examine those kind of places in a safe way, because it's a novel, you know.

**Don Payne** [00:24:14] It does have a way of personalizing. That genre has a way of humanizing and personalizing issues that can so easily be held at a distance by abstraction in principle, you know, when they're discussed as ideas. It's easy to treat them in a very different way and to keep them at a supposedly safe distance from ourselves. And that's what I love about the kind of work you're doing, is that it gives us a way of personalizing and even internalizing that narrative and thinking about it in a very different way.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:24:49] I'm surprised to hear how much people come to care about a fictional character. They ask me, what's going to happen next? Is she, there's a love interest in this story, Don, and so people will say are she and Jack going to get together.

**Don Payne** [00:25:13] Yeah. It's funny, I hear the same thing about television dramas. You know, were the authors of the drama, they'll meet somebody on the street who is angry at them for how they treat a certain character. Right.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:25:26] Right. So, I told somebody, if I knew it was going to be so much fun, I would have tried this a long time ago.

**Don Payne** [00:25:36] I'm so glad you're doing it. I mentioned this a little bit earlier, but I imagine you meet a lot of people who when they find out you're a writer, their first impulse is to tell you about their own writing aspirations. What do you tell them?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:25:52] I invite them to find a writing conference where people who write and people who publish will convene. Just last week, for example, at the Saint Andrew United Methodist Church in Highlands Ranch, a conference hosted by a writing group called Writing for Your Life, held a writing conference and people were there from all over the country. Some people from Canada and at those places, not only are there workshops and, you know, lectures and that sort of thing about writing and publishing, but also publishers and often representatives from publishing houses. And so, I say all that to say I invite people to go to the places where people who are doing the work are already getting together. So, you meet them. You get your questions answered. You have an opportunity to present your writing to somebody who could actually do something about it. And so instead of staying at home and what can be a solo existence, you get with the community, the writing community, the best way to find out if you do indeed have some potential and opportunities.

**Don Payne** [00:27:24] What do you think are some of the biggest illusions or misconceptions that people have about being a writer?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:27:34] That it is easy, because good writing often looks easy. That it's easy, and that they'll right off the bat have great success. My friend Jerry Jenkins, who lives here in Colorado and has written many, many books, mentioned that his big bestseller, The Left Behind series, was I think his 120th or something book. And so, there's often not really understanding that there's rarely, if ever, overnight success and that it is a journey and a long one.

**Don Payne** [00:28:29] You throw a lot of stuff into the well, don't you? Before you go for something, at least often, before something comes of it.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:28:35] Yes. So that's one thing for sure.

**Don Payne** [00:28:38] I suppose you've had your own discouragement, setbacks along the way in your career as a writer and as a teacher of writing.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:28:45] Many. I started out, I confess this, I started out wanting to be as successful as many of the authors I personally know just here in Colorado, many authors who are a million seller authors, Philip Yancey, Jerry Jenkins. And it's a long list of people here, right here in this state. But my working Scripture is Galatians 6:4. The new living translation says, Pay careful attention to your own work. And then you'll have the

satisfaction of a job well done and you won't have to compare yourself to anybody else. And so that particular scripture is plastered above my desktop at home, because on any given day I could look at what some other author has done or accomplished or achieved instead of focusing on the assignment that I have on the work that I've been given to do.

**Don Payne** [00:30:02] What a great word. What a great word. How has your writing shaped you over the years do you think?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:30:13] It has demanded that I tell the truth. I say this in writing workshops, writing is about two things. It's about truth and it's about courage. And if you know your truth and you have the courage to put it on paper, when people see it, they'll say, Oh, that was so good. And I think what they mean is, oh my goodness, somebody is telling the truth about this hard thing. So, writing has demanded of me that truth telling. But the other thing, and I was thinking about this driving over here today, writing demands courage, and my foray into fiction, I discovered that if I found a brave way to say something or let something happen in my story, the story became better. And, you know, at first, I was kind of tiptoeing around thinking, can I let this happen? Can I let this person say that? What if Tyndale house says no, you can't. And so, what I was hearing from them and hearing in my soul was do the scary, hard but brave thing. And that's where the rich writing happens. So, you know, the place that scares us the most is where we should be writing.

**Don Payne** [00:31:50] Mm hmm. That. We need to capture that, bold that, italicize that, underline that. That's the gold, the place that scares us the most is the place where we should be writing. Well, thanks for that.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:32:03] Because if it scares us, it's scaring other people. And if we will do the work of reflecting on it and writing about that, then we not just help ourselves. Because it shouldn't be, writing shouldn't just be catharsis for the author or the writer, but it then should help the people who are waiting for that information.

**Don Payne** [00:32:28] Yeah. And in that sense, it is service, it is ministry.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:32:31] It is ministry. Only recently have I started calling what I do my writing ministry. I, you know, for a while, for many years, I thought, this is my work, but I understand it now. It is a ministry.

**Don Payne** [00:32:45] Yeah, well, even if you've only recently started to call it that, it has been that for a long, long time. And for me too for some years, since I first read something you wrote, thank you for that. We've been interacting with Patricia Raybon. Patricia, thanks. Thanks for spending time with us and for sharing so much with us, including your experiences today. It's been a great gift. Let me commend to you again all of Patricia's books, particularly her most recent, the mystery novel called All That Is Secret by Tyndale House. Get that. I think you'll deeply enjoy it.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:33:25] Thank you.

**Don Payne** [00:33:26] And we look forward to the next installment, I hear.

**Patricia Raybon** [00:33:30] Yes, book two.

**Don Payne** [00:33:31] There's another one in the cooker?

**Patricia Raybon** [00:33:33] Yes. Look for that in February of 2023, the title is Double the Lies.

**Don Payne** [00:33:42] Double the Lies. Okay. Can't wait. Can't wait. This has been good. Friends, this is engage360. We're glad that you take some time regularly to interact with our guests through these conversations. We hope they're beneficial to you. Remember that you can find all of our podcast conversations on our website at [Denver Seminary.edu](http://DenverSeminary.edu), as well as full transcripts of each one on our website. So please access those as you would find that beneficial. Let me encourage you again, remind you again to visit our website for other resources. And if you or people you know are looking for theological education in various ways, we've got a lot of resources to offer. We'd love to interact with you about how you could take advantage of those. Friends, we'll talk to you again soon. Take care.