

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Ready to add a big dose of positivity and empowered perspective to your day? You've come to the right place. Welcome to She Said/She Said Podcast. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. Here, we tackle everything from impostor syndrome and confidence building to the best advice on how to lead yourself through life pivots, including the ones that knock you flat. For the past three years, I've talked to hundreds of experts about their stories. Here, you'll find their actionable advice and lessons as well as my own tools that you can put to use in your own life. Stick around. I think you'll find this investment in you well worth it.

Hi, friend. Welcome. My guest today on the podcast is Gayle Tzemach Lemmon. She is a bestselling author whose work and talent as a storyteller and journalist has given us a firsthand understanding of women facing incredible odds in both male-dominated societies in the Middle East as well as on the battlefield. What's more, Gayle has told the stories that might not otherwise have made it into our collective consciousness. Her latest book is *The Daughters of Kobani*. It is the extraordinary story of the women who took on the Islamic State in Syria and won. It is incredible, I promise you.

It's a story that most of us have not heard, and frankly, likely wouldn't have without Gayle's commitment and dedication to telling it, and Gayle proves her mettle as a uniquely gifted storyteller once again. Gayle's earlier books have included *Ashley's War*, which is the untold story of a team of U.S. women soldiers on the special ops battlefield. Now, it was published in 2015, and it is soon to hit the big screen. In 2011, Gayle published *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*. It's about a young woman entrepreneur who supported her community despite the Taliban.

The fact that Gayle's latest book has been endorsed by both the author Elizabeth Gilbert of *Eat, Pray, Love* fame as well as retired U.S. Navy four-star Admiral Bill McRaven is not only high praise for Gayle, but it speaks to her power to capture the depth and importance of a challenging but incredibly important story. As we think about Women's History Month, Gayle has not only memorialized women history makers, but in the process has also solidified her own role as a uniquely gifted storyteller for this generation. Gayle, welcome to *She Said/She Said*.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Thank you for having me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm delighted to have you. This most recent book is really fabulous, but before we get into that, I would love for you to start by telling us a bit about yourself: how you grew up and what inspired you on this path to telling the stories of women in conflict zones and in combat.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

So I grew up in Greenbelt, Maryland, not too far from your Nation's Capitol, although several lifetimes away, and really grew up in a community of single moms, all of whom worked at least two jobs. My mother worked at the phone company during the day, that was when there was one phone company, and sold Tupperware at night, and I would actually go with her pretty often to Tupperware parties that she would host and [crosstalk 00:03:46] and do the icebreakers and all this stuff, carry the huge bag. This was a whole different era, pre-Internet.

And I grew up really knowing, as my mother said, that life is hard when I would complain. And she would often say to me when I would complain, as all children do, that on a scale of major world tragedies, yours is not a three. And I think I really was taught to look life in the face very early by women

who got on with it and taught us the art, which ended up becoming the superpower of just getting on with it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. How did that lead you on this journey? I know you started as a journalist, but you've done some career pivots as well. But-

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Multiple.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Talk a little bit about how you got your start.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Sure. So I started in news. I actually, for all those who are listening and trying to figure out their first job, every first job I thought I had, dissolved right before I took it. And I ended up getting a job at a production company because my dad's girlfriend's friend had somebody they knew who worked at a production company in D.C. Every news internship and job I thought I had coming out of Missouri Journalism School absolutely went away, and I had no idea what I was going to do. Ended up wrapping cables and working in... Booking crews for a production company. Working for a wonderful person named Brenda who really gave me a shot.

Went from there to CBS News, where I would call... Every day I would call this gentleman at ABC News from the pay phone [inaudible 00:05:18]. I would say, "When is the news job going to open up?" And he would say, "Gayle, I still don't have anything for you. We still have a hiring freeze." One day he said to me, "I just got a call from a friend at CBS who's looking for somebody." And that was it. I called CBS. I got this job that actually had been a union job that they turned into three different jobs. And I took one piece of it and worked booking crews, and then also learned the editorial side.

From there, went to CNN.com, and that was at a time when no one knew whether anybody would want to get their news online. People would say, "Why would you do that? That's a terrible idea for your career, to go to this dot something. Dot what?" And I said, "No, no." And I really learned a lot at CNN.com that first year. I also noted, of course, also, that only young women were the coordinators, and young men would come in at higher levels, and you would really see that... The structural piece, I think, didn't really strike me until much later.

And I went from there to ABC News, which was tremendous. Ended up covering all manner of political stories. Ended up being there for seven years, and back to the TV side pretty early on in that process. And then I quit ABC three times, once to go on a Fulbright to Spain, once to go on a Robert Bosch Fellowship to Germany, and then finally to go to Harvard Business School, which was really not an obvious place for me to have gone. And my family thought it was insane, because they said, "You keep moving." And I said, "I'm not moving worlds. I'm moving opportunities. I'm not changing my entire trajectory. I keep looking for bigger venues." But it was hard as a twentysomething, really, to always be going against what people thought your life should look like, especially people who love you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. Absolutely. That can be one of the hardest things.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Correct.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

There's a number of really interesting things in what you've just said, but one in particular that jumps out at me is this notion of the career build, that you didn't necessarily know... At least I'm gathering from what you've just said. You didn't necessarily know or have a specific plan, in terms of where you thought you would end up. It was more taking advantage of these opportunities and continuing to allow them to build on themselves.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

That's right. I'm working for wonderful people and around wonderful people, and when I didn't work for and around wonderful people, finding those who would support me, I was deeply fortunate. Michel Martin was at ABC at the time. She was amazing. I worked for George Stephanopoulos. Cokie Roberts was there at the time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Amazing.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Michel McQueen... Was Michel McQueen early on, and then Michel Martin when she was married. And I think finding incredible people... That network, especially at ABC, really served me well, and those continue to be some of my absolutely closest friends. But I had lots of periods where I thought, "Where is this all going? I know there's something bigger I want to do, but it's not happening fast enough." So for those of you who are out there feeling that way, I fully understand, and the only answer is to keep pushing through.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. I love that advice. Okay, so you go to Harvard Business School-

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Yes, and I took a year preparing to go. So I took classes. I worked in the Sunday show, and I was off Monday and Tuesday, and so I would take classes at USDA, because the Department of Agriculture has great classes, which very few people know, and it had statistics and economics and all of these things I thought I would need if I went to business school. And I took GMAT classes, because at that time, you had to take the GMAT to go to business school.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Okay, so take us from the pivot. You went to Harvard Business School, but then how did you pivot into writing these amazing books? I mean, you've had a completely different and just incredible career as a storyteller in a way that... This is, again, a very big departure from what you were doing before. So walk us through how that first book came to be. How did you [inaudible 00:09:30] the journey from-

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

There was lots of failure involved, so I'm sure everybody loves stories of failures [inaudible 00:09:35] couple good ones, because... Obviously I'm very fortunate. I have happy endings, but they almost didn't, and I think that goes to the drive to be inevitable, that even if you get knocked down several times along the way, you have enough conviction to know that people should never bet against you in the long term.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Love that.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

And so what happened with Dressmaker was, I had an amazing job out of business school. I was recruited-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Just to stop you for a second. This is your first book, Dressmaker of Khair Khana.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

And that's about a teenage girl whose business supported her family under the Taliban, and all these young women who were breadwinners during years when they could not be on their own streets. And when I first heard this story... So I guess, to back up a little bit, I started going to Afghanistan in my second year of business school, because I was already by then combining private sector work...

So I had spent the summer before working at BP in London in St James's Square. And then I went from there to Rwanda to do a piece that ended up running in The Financial Times about women who were the survivors of the genocide and women whose husbands had perpetrated the genocide, who weaved baskets together that were sold at Macy's department store. Absolutely amazing person who runs that company, and absolutely amazing story. I was honored to be able to bring it to readers, and I think that was the first time...

Watching people react to that story was the first time I saw... This form of storytelling, I'd never written print before, was that this format of storytelling really can reach people in entirely different ways. And The Dressmaker book grew out of that, because after Rwanda, Harvard Business School came and said, "What would you want to do next?" And I said, "Well, I want to go to Afghanistan." And so I ended up going to Afghanistan in December of '05, looking for both a protagonist for a case study, which is how you teach courses at Harvard Business School, and a protagonist for a Financial Times piece on entrepreneurs in Afghanistan.

Ended up meeting Kamila Sidiqi, who at that point did not have a business that was ready to be written about. But she was one of the most moving and striking entrepreneurs I had ever met anywhere, and she was talking to me about how she was starting this business now, that was in 2005, that was going to create jobs and train entrepreneurs all around Afghanistan. And I said, "But why are you so passionate about entrepreneurship? What taught you that?" And she said, "Oh, Gayle, I thought you knew: This is my third business. My first business I started under the Taliban. And that was a great business. We created dresses for people all around our neighborhood. And that's what really taught me I was an entrepreneur."

And my jaw, Laura, just hit the ground, and it really started the tradition that continues through Daughters of Kobani, which is that every great story starts with a question you cannot answer. And I wanted to know how this young woman became an entrepreneur in years that I thought women had just been kind of shuttered indoors in [inaudible 00:12:49], not leaving their homes and certainly not

supporting their families. And it just showed, really, how little we knew about women's lives at that time, about the realities of that moment, about the economic piece of life under the Taliban, and how little credit these young women had ever received for all the work they had done to manufacture hope at a desperate time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. That book really launched your career as a writer.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Yes. And it was a book very few people expected to do as well as it did commercially, in terms of moving people. I always felt, though... I write for the people with whom I grew up. I always felt that national security is everybody's job [inaudible 00:13:36] everybody's work. And if we only would speak to the American public in a way that made it personal and tangible and accessible and digestible and would move them, we would end up in a very different conversation than nameless, faceless people shooting at other nameless, faceless people, with no context and minimal attention [paid 00:13:59].

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I mean, you are truly gifted at what you just articulated, this idea of the power of story to convey very complex areas of gray and help people understand the personalities and the people involved, and the politics involved. It really takes an incredible storyteller, and your latest book is another perfect example of your incredible gift as a storyteller. Let's talk about that book. It's called *The Daughters of Kobani*, and it tells the story of the Women's Protection Unit, which I have to admit I had never heard of. [crosstalk 00:14:39] This is going to be new to a lot of people. So if you would, Gayle, set the stage for us. What is this book about?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

This book is about the women who fought to hand the Islamic State its first defeat, and the women who, when ISIS came to their neighborhoods, said, "No. No more. Even if this is the last thing we do, we will not let these men with their ideology that puts the enslavement and the buying and selling of women and girls right at its heart, we will not allow that to stand. And not only will we fight against ISIS, but we are fighting for women's emancipation."

And quite honestly, the first time I heard about them, I didn't know whether I should believe it, because it sounded like something you would invent if you were making up a Shakespearian showdown between the men who bought and sold women on one side and the women who had equality and emancipation right on the other, AK-47s in tow, with fewer people, fewer weapons, less ammunition, less food, less training, but more will.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Talk about how the YPJ came to be in the first place. Describe for people what we're talk- It's a women's fighting force, but how did this even come to be?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

So if you think about what would happen in your neighborhood if there were chaos, right? Women would get together, they would figure out how to protect their families, how to protect their neighborhoods, how to protect their towns. Women would be part of that conversation. Look at the

communities we all live in. Women, wherever you are, are a central part of taking care of families, of standing up when things are going down, and of really taking care of people who need it that they love. And that was the same here.

So the chaos of the Syrian Civil War started. Women who were part of their neighborhood, especially young women, got together. There were already young men organizing, and they said, "We should be part of this. We should be part of keeping people out of our neighborhoods that we don't want in if we think they're going to bring ideas and ideologies. And for the first time, we're going to govern ourselves." Because these were women who were part of an ethnic minority, the Kurds, who had never had self-rule. They were not seeking statehood, but they were seeking to be able to speak their language, name their babies what they wish, publish in their language, teach their kids in their language, celebrate their holidays. So that was just the idea, right? It was nothing more than that: "We're going to take up arms to make sure that we can defend our areas and keep people out." And as one of the women in the book, Nowruz, who leads the Women's Protection Unit, said, "Fighting ISIS was the last thing on our minds."

So initially, women take up arms alongside men, and by 2013, they decide to form, from the People's Protection Units that were men and women, Women's Protection Units. And when I asked them why, Rojda, who ends up being the woman who leads the entire campaign to get to push ISIS out of its so-called capital of Raqqa, from which it planned attacks against U.S., against Europe, and certainly against the region, she said, "There were two things. One is that we couldn't let that kind of ideology stand. And secondly, we just didn't want men taking credit for our work." [crosstalk 00:18:16] I said, "Well, there's the whole book." Because it is about the universal amid a conflict that feels far away, a sentiment that could not feel closer to home.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. How did you originally hear about the YPJ?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

So the second book I did, which grew out of Dressmaker in some ways, was called Ashley's War, about an all-women special operations team that had been recruited for Army Ranger and Navy SEAL missions in 2011, while women remained officially banned from ground combat. And these young women had simply put their hands up when their country asked. The country said, "We need women on the Special Operations battlefield. There are things that women can do, places they can access that men cannot, and we need women seeing the kind of combat experienced by less than 5% of the entire United States military.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's a fabulous, fabulous book, for those who don't know. The book is called Ashley's War. It's about to be made into a movie, which we'll talk about in a second. Yeah, apologies for interrupting.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

[crosstalk 00:19:21] And so one of the soldiers... To your question, Laura, what called me... Cassie, who you'll meet in Ashley's War, she was in Syria, and she said, "You have to come here." And I was actually in the middle of preschool pickup at the time. And she said, "You have to come to Syria, because there is an incredible story here. There are women fighting ISIS and leading, not just fighting, leading men and women in the battle against ISIS." And she said, "And the Americans have huge respect for them. And

that includes the most elite fighters of U.S. Special Operations who have spent their entire adult lives deployed in their nation's wars." And she said, "You have to come see it, because their whole quest for equality goes far, and you will be absolutely shocked when you see it on the ground."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

You had to leave small children. You had preschoolers at the time. You had to leave them at home in order to decide whether this was a story that you wanted to tell and really invest the time and effort and years into telling it. Maybe talk a little bit about how you thought about that decision.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Sure. And it's an interesting question, because men rarely get asked this. And I think more people should, if women are going to get asked this. And I think about all these questions a great deal.

I'll say two things. One is, I saw immediately what this story would mean to so many people. How did we not know that women were stopping the men of the Islamic State? How did we not know that they were America's partner in stopping ISIS, that they were keeping you and me from having to go on the ground to fight ISIS? They were doing the world's work in stopping ISIS from holding physical territory from which they could plan attacks. And that was the first reason.

The second reason was, I definitely felt a personal connection to it. My father's from the region, and we had had, as you see in *Daughters of Kobani*, we had had many funny debates throughout my girlhood about equality and women. And my father was raised in a world where the notion of women and men being on the same plane was confounding. And then one day, when I asked him directly, I said, "This is ridiculous. I see all these women still cooking all day, and we clean... Why shouldn't men be cooking and cleaning all day?" And he looked at me and said, "Do you really think men and women are equal?" And [inaudible 00:21:55] said, "Yeah! Of course I do."

And Laura, I have to say, I have to really give credit to my father, who's now passed. But years later, he was living in South Florida. He had a Harvard Business School dad shirt on, and Palm Beach. And this lady came up to him and said, "Oh, how's your son doing at Harvard?" Maybe she was looking for somebody for her daughter. I don't know. But my father said, "Why can't it be my daughter? It's not my son at Harvard Business School. It's my daughter." And I joked with him. I said, "Only took you 30 years, but you really got there. I'm so proud." So I really inherently understood a fraction of a shard of an inkling, truly, about what it would have taken for young women from the region to take up arms and lead in war and reshape what women's work meant in their towns, in their neighborhoods, in their homes.

And then I think the third thing is, I lost my mother. My mother passed when I was 13. And she really, as I was saying, taught me to look life in the face and really taught me that every day counted, and you must do work that you believe in. And if you have the privilege of using your voice, you must open doors and share the voices of others who don't have the same ability to be in the arena, galoshes on, elbows out, you know, that you do. And it really did give me a sense of, I think, the finite nature of our days and of our work. And then it had to have consequence. It had to have stakes.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Are your children old enough to understand a bit about your work [crosstalk 00:23:45]? And do you have boys or girls?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Both.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And so how do they think about what it is that you do?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

I think they think every parent goes to Syria. We don't really talk about it in any way other than... We talk a lot about their responsibility. I always tell them the same things my mother said, which is, "It's good to want," when they tell me they want things. "It's good to be hungry. It's good to want." And I often tell them when they say "That's hard," I said, "Life is hard. It's supposed to be hard." So I think they are absolutely up to their ears with my sayings. And I'm sure when they're older, we'll all poke fun at me for all of them.

But yeah, we talk a lot about when you have as much privilege as they do, and you have as much opportunity as they do, what is your responsibility? I don't know that it all stays with them. I would say maybe only a small percentage does. But I hear them sometimes repeat it back to other people. And then you know [inaudible 00:24:51]. I mean, I had an absolutely extraordinary mother who really, I think, was unmatched in strength. And between my mother and my grandmother, I really never had to look farther than the women in my family for role models. And I fall short all the time in offering that to them, but I do hope that I give them some percentage of what was given to me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. It's amazing. Back to the book *The Daughters of Kobani*. Maybe talk about... You decided to center the story around four women fighters. Talk about how you picked those four.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

They were the people that, when I would come back, I would talk to everybody about. And I truly think, for those of you who are seeking to be storytellers and those of you who are, the thing that always stays with me is, don't look at your notebook when you come back, but empty your imagination. Who do you want to tell everybody about? What are the stories you want everybody to know when you call your godmother or you call your aunt or you call your friends? Who are the people that don't leave you alone because you can't stop thinking about their stories and about the trust they offered you?

And that was really how I did, because they all four stood for very different leadership styles, very different ways of approaching the world. And certainly none of them were superhuman. And I think that's so important when we're talking about women in our stories. This is not *Thor: Ragnarok*. This is not *Wonder Woman*, both of which I love deeply, but it's not. And I think we have a real issue with the way we see narratives, because people who are women who do extraordinary things, we call exceptions, and people who are men who do extraordinary things, we call leaders.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Right. Talk about the different variations of those leadership styles amongst those four women.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

So you have Nowruz. Very quiet, but very assertive. It's so interesting. So many of these women were raised by mothers who never got to go to school. And in fact, almost everybody across ages had mothers who did not get to be educated formally, or maybe got two to three years max. And you think about

that huge generational change that that embodies. So you have Nowruz, who's a quiet, a firm leader, and just a role model. There's a moment in the book where everybody would talk about... We were low on everything, but we had will. And Nowruz got on the radio and said to all her frontline commanders, "These men think you're worth nothing. They think you have no value. Show them what you're made of so that even if this is your last moment, it will stand for something."

And that speech, as a leader, spoke to every one of those field commanders, and they would all repeat it to me, almost word for word, because it had stayed with them at a time when it looked like they were going to lose, like they would be the next casual- It's hard to remember, no one had beaten ISIS at that point, and the world was on its hind feet and terrified. And here's David versus Goliath, with David also being a woman, taking on ISIS and saying, "No, we're not going to give you one more win." So that's Nowruz.

Then you had Rojda. Introverted. Huge soccer fan. Would much rather read books than be talking to people. Azeema, who's swashbuckling, chain-smoking, hilarious, the kind of person you would pray to be seated next to at a dinner party [inaudible 00:28:31] good fun. If you're from the South, "good fun" would be the word [inaudible 00:28:35] use to describe her, and who was just a leader who led from the front, who was beloved for never putting people in harm's way that she didn't also go herself.

And then Znarin, who's a story that so many readers already have written me about because, you know, wanted to go to university. Family said, "Girls don't do that in our family." Wanted to marry a person she loved. Her uncle had already chosen someone else for her. And she said, "No, I'm not marrying anybody. You took my hopes. You took my dreams. I'm going to live my own life, and I will never marry." And then she gets a knock on the door, asking her to be part of this political movement that has women's equality right at the heart, and of course she says yes. I mean, wouldn't you at that point? And we follow her from being Nowruz's driver and aide, all the way to helping to lead her hometown to its liberation from the Islamic State and having girls come up to her. And it's that journey that so many women listening, so many men listening, in their own ways, have been on that I think is what people are really responding to.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. You talk about in the book the fact that these women hadn't necessarily realized that women's rights was even a thing. They knew conceptually what that meant, but didn't necessarily understand that this is what the rest of the world was focused on. Is that fair?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Absolutely, and in fact, there's funny moments in the book where I spent amazing times, truly remarkable afternoons with young women from the Arab communities in Raqqa who lived under ISIS. And I could have done those interviews... I really could have moved in there for a year, and you still wouldn't have gotten all their stories. One of them just reminded me of the character Encyclopedia Brown. She had read. Never left the house for three years under the Islamic State, but read books and books and books and spoke in full paragraphs when she spoke. And she's maybe 19 or 20.

And then there were two young women at the part of the Manbij Military Council who kept looking down when I would interview them, had never met a foreigner, certainly hadn't been interviewed. And I finally said, "Wait a minute. When you came here, one of the parts of this women's training is ideology. And I'm sure they talk to you about women's equality, right? Did they talk to you about women's rights?" And they nodded. And I said, "Had you ever heard that notion before?" These

two finally broke the wall, and they looked at me and just started laughing with huge smiles and said, "Of course we had never heard the phrase 'women's rights.' We thought it was something they made up when they started talking about it. And we called our mothers and our grandmothers, and they didn't believe it, either. And our cousins started looking it up." Yeah, and it was absolutely mind-blowing.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It's absolutely amazing. There are many, many incredible stories that you tell in this book, but one is about the YPJ's operation to rescue 21 of their own soldiers. Maybe talk a little bit about that story, because it's so powerful.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Yes, and that's the moment when Azeema had... You have to remember how few people, given the scale of what ISIS was bringing, the People's Protection Units at that time helped with some Free Syrian Army and some Iraqi Peshmerga, how imbalanced that fight was against the Islamic State. ISIS came in, and the U.S. folks would talk to me at length about how ISIS was more like a conventional force, more like a regular military than a kind of Al-Qaeda style, even, insurgency. They had a rapid reaction force. They had very good command and control. They understood warfare. And here you have a fighting force that has very brave people, but certainly had not been up against the Americans the way many of the ISIS fighters had, had not faced a true conventional force in the way that ISIS now presented a threat.

So they were trying to run an operation, and it ended up that their folks got pinned down, and they couldn't meet in the point that they intended to. It ended up that 21 of them were in a building, basically taking fire from ISIS and pinned down. And Azeema is trying to figure out how to get her people out, how to keep them from dying before she can rescue them. And we really spend the whole afternoon with her, trying to figure out what is the way to get them out alive, understanding and feeling the weight of her responsibility as a leader. Also watching as other options fail as she's trying and failing different ways to get them out.

And I think one of the funniest things, and I mean kind of funny in a little bit of a humorous way, is her yelling at them, "Don't listen to other people on the radio." Because I think that happens in chaotic situations, wherever you are in the world. Everybody has a plan. And she would say, "The only person you can listen to now is me. Stay off the radio. Don't listen to anybody else who tells you they can get you out of this." And we really follow her as she takes on that weight as leader.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Wow. It's just amazing. It's such a great book. I know-

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Glad it spoke to you. [crosstalk 00:33:47]

Laura Cox Kaplan:

It is fabulous. Well, you've already written a couple of bestsellers. I know that this one will be a bestseller as well.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

It is one, yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, already.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Yes, it's very exciting.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So exciting. So you have auctioned the rights so far for Ashley's War, as well as this book. There's interest in this, or maybe you've already sold it, right? So you're getting ready to bring these stories, both Ashley's War and The Daughters of Kobani, to the big screen. I just had A'Lelia Bundles, who is the great-great-granddaughter-

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Yes! I worked with at ABC.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

She's amazing. She's an incredible storyteller like you. She has been the keeper of her family history. She's, of course, the great-great-granddaughter of Madam C.J. Walker. But when she wrote her book about Madame Walker and then ultimately sold it to Netflix, they made this series called Self Made. And when they did, they fictionalized certain elements of the story that was pretty devastating to A'Lelia, and we talk about that on the podcast. Talk about how you're focused on protecting these stories, which I know you are very passionate about telling and making sure that they're told accurately so that we have an accurate historic record. Talk about the process that you're going through to make sure that those stories are told correctly.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

I will say it starts with being very clear up front. Neither of them is on the screen yet, so I will say... I'll come back when they are. [inaudible 00:35:22] But I will say, having learned and seen a lot of that and having enormous respect for folks like A'Lelia, who I just think is both a leader and just a person of deep integrity [inaudible 00:35:33] and who was a real mentor back to ABC who really mentored me. And I don't even know if she would remember it. I remember going to the book party for her book [crosstalk 00:35:43] Madam C.J. Walker.

And the first thing starts with helping them understand the responsibility, understand that real people trusted you with this story. So in the case of Ashley's War, the team has been amazing from the start: Reese Witherspoon, Bruna Papandrea, now Lesli Linka Glatter, who directed Homeland, Donna Langley at Universal. Natalie Krinsky is a director. So all of these people who really do understand that there... I know there are certain things in their world that they must fictionalize, but that there are key points that must be gotten right. And so they have been very open throughout, and we've been working very hard on that front. When it comes to Daughters of Kobani, of course, it will involve creators from the region and the people whose story this is. It would be an honor and a dream to shoot some of it in Kobani, if that were possible. So yeah, I think at the end of the day, it is about trust and responsibility.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Very good advice. What's next for you? I know [crosstalk 00:36:52] this book. You've just given birth, so to speak [crosstalk 00:36:57] way people talk about their books, but do you have other projects on the horizon that you're ready to talk about?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

I do have other projects on the horizon. I'm not quite ready to talk about them yet. And I'm having lots of conversations around those projects, and also what's the best way to reach people and move people with stories I think inspire and that... If you think about, we read to know we're not alone, and we write to make the personal universal. And the piece that matters most to me is about connecting people to their world. The whole notion that has animated the work is that suffocated opportunity is the enemy of global stability, and that if you care about, as more stable, more secure, more prosperous world, you must care about tapping into opportunity and getting the God-given talents of each one of our people on the planet out into the world. And that is really the theme I think about the most.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Do you view that as you look at your body of work so far and you think about the impact that you hope you will have had? Is that how you think about impact?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

No. I received an e-mail, is the short answer to your question. I received an e-mail, or a text, actually, a couple of days back from somebody who had been part of helping me understand The Daughters of Kobani story early on. And a service member from the United States, who I hadn't heard from in years, who wrote me to say, "I heard an interview with you, and I'm so very proud, because this takes some of the weight from me in having to tell their story, and I want to thank you, for them and for me."

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's amazing. I love that.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

And that was so moving, because it had not been easy for this person to speak with me. It had been very difficult to go back into that terrain, emotionally. And to know that that person felt, [inaudible 00:39:14] service member, felt honored and felt that this book had worked to make their truth universal, means everything. And so if you talk about impact, if people feel moved and inspired and, like, they were more capable of doing more after they listened to something I've had the privilege of sharing or read something I've had the privilege of sharing, then I've done [inaudible 00:39:42].

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Beautiful. Just beautiful. I have one final question. Actually, I have many, many more questions, but I'm not going to keep you here all day. If you could boil it down into a single piece of advice, maybe it's a piece of advice that you would have given to young Gayle when she was just launching her career, or maybe it's something that you tell your kids, what would that be?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

The biggest piece of advice I can give is to ignore everyone. The truth is that everybody will tell you what you should do, and most of the time, you know it, but you're too scared to do it. And own your own success. Do not...

As my aunt always says, when I called her when I was... [inaudible 00:40:32] advice twice, but I had Dressmaker coming out right when I also had my first child. And I said, "Oh," I called [inaudible 00:40:41] Gloria and I said, "Everybody's telling me I can't do this. I'm so stressed." And she started laughing, and she said to me, "Never import other people's limitations."

And it is very important. It's especially important for women. When everyone tells you, and that's actually at the end of *The Daughters of Kobani*, everyone wants to tell women and girls, "Don't ask for too much, and make sure that your ask fits with our world." And actually, you don't need to do that. You need to imagine the world as you would want to see it. If you are doing your responsibility toward yourself and toward others, you will know what you should be doing. You just might have to listen really hard to hear yourself through fear and through everybody else telling you what you should be doing.

And that's why I always tell, young women especially, but also young men: "Ignore everyone and pursue your path." And then I guess the corollary to that is also "Pay your rent." [inaudible 00:41:43] enough to just have dreams and hopes, right? You also have to go to work every day.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Okay, I have one follow-up, though. Do you have any tools or techniques for turning all of that off and really honing in on what your own gifts are saying to you, what your own self is telling you that you should be doing?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Well, I would ask you that. I don't have all the answers. I think, Laura, you talk to a lot of people who have great tools, so one thing I would say is: If this were your last hour, what would you spend it doing? Write down what it was you would be doing. What would you wish you had done? And oftentimes, truth will emerge from that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. I love that. Gayle, amazing. You are amazing. The book is amazing. I loved this conversation. I'm so, so grateful that you spent some time with us today.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Thank you for having me. I so enjoyed it, and I'm really delighted to share *The Daughters of Kobani*, and so glad that it moved you. It's been a true honor and a journey to bring it to readers.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. That's amazing. Thank you for joining us, and thank you for the book. It's terrific.

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon:

Oh, thank you so much, and I look forward to the next time.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

This transcript was exported on Mar 18, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Hey, friend. Hope you enjoyed this conversation with Gayle Tzemach Lemmon as much as I did. What an incredible way of thinking about the power of storytelling. To learn a bit more about Gayle, I've included some links in the show notes for this episode. You'll find links to all three of her terrific books, *The Daughters of Kobani*, which is out now, *Ashley's War*, and *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana*.

Friends, also, have a favor. If you are enjoying *She Said/She Said* Podcast, I would love to hear from you. If you're listening on iTunes, be sure to click the review button, give us five stars, and a few comments. And also, send me some feedback directly. You can reach me on Instagram via direct message @lauracoxkaplan, as well as @shesaidshesaidpodcast, and you can also contact us via the contact link on the website at shesaidshesaidpodcast.com. Most of all, I am grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us today. I hope you found this little investment in you well worth it. I'll see you next time. Until then, take care.