

Oral history interview with Faye Ringel, interviewed by Peter Moran for the Connecticut Historical Society's Community History Project discussing her experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Interviewed on May 31, 2022 in Norwich, Connecticut.

Peter Moran: All right. And then everything else we're just going to do the way we usually do it, by the book. I've got a list of questions I'll go down. Some of these questions are going to seem obvious. Some of them are going to seem foolish, maybe, but we've got to remember that this will hopefully benefit someone one hundred years from now or two hundred years from now, who may just be learning about Covid for the first time or learning about the year 2020 for the first time. So, I guess I'll start off just saying, my name is Peter Moran. It is May 31, 2022. We're doing a virtual interview today and I'm sitting in my home in New Haven and I am speaking to -- if you want to introduce yourself.

Faye Ringel: Hi, I'm Faye Ringel and I am speaking to you from my lifelong home at Norwich, CT.

Moran: Faye, you are recently retired, correct?

Ringel: No.

Moran: No? Remind me where you work then? Sorry.

Ringel: I'm Professor Emerita from the US Coast Guard Academy where I technically, I officially retired in 2009 but worked as a contractor for another four years. So, I would call my retirement 2013 and since then of course I've done some teaching and I've done a few other things in retirement. But yeah, I've been retired a long time.

Moran: A long time. Awesome. Well, good. I'm just going to start off and ask you to think back to 2020 and ask if you remember where and when you first heard about Covid-19?

Ringel: I was at a science fiction convention in February 2020. Boskone, it's called. I used to attend regularly, and everyone was talking about this new Chinese flu and wondering whether it would affect us. Immediately I became extremely interested and nervous and read everything that I could. At that convention I remember I did not eat with anyone else. I of course masks weren't a thing yet, but I isolated myself as much as I could. And when the news started to break in March -- the U.S. cases -- I immediately said, this is it. This is the big one. I was the first to urge the Norwich Arts Center, which I'll be talking about more, to close down. And we did. Ahead of the Governor's requirement in the second week in March.

Moran: What was the first disruption to your life due to Covid? Was it closing the Arts Center?

Ringel: Yes. I don't know if you -- before that, as I said, I had begun to take precautions. I did a library -- I remember I did a library program at the East Lyme Public Library just about a week before the shutdown. Usually, we provided refreshments and I made sure that it was just individually wrapped things and bottled water. We just had no idea, really, about the right precautions. Meanwhile we were all breathing on each other. But yes, the first real disruption was my decision that we needed to shut down the Arts Center, about four days ahead of the Governor's proclamation.

Moran: Do you have a disruption that you would say was the biggest disruption to your life due to Covid?

Ringel: Everything! [laughs] I mean I'm the one who from that day -- from March 9, 2020 -- barely left the house. I completely changed my life and began to develop extreme anxiety any time that I did. I have yet to rejoin the world.

Moran: I'm curious then, I understand that you were probably one of the earliest folks taking precautions. And early on, as you were saying, we didn't really understand how it was communicated, so what were those early precautions you were taking at the start of the pandemic?

Ringel: Well, before the general announcement came, before the cases started to arise, as I said I just thought, well maybe keep hands off each other. I had some idea of social distancing and limiting crowds. Food handling and things like that. But immediately, as soon as better information was released I said, nope, the only thing that's going to stop this is if people just stay away from each other altogether. And I've been proven right. Because every time mask mandates are lifted, there's a spike. Every time people go back to their old way of doing things until now. Even the CDC and everyone else is saying, everyone's going to get it. It's going to continue to mutate, and we really don't know what's next.

Moran: Do you want to talk a little bit about your day-to-day life? Things like shopping and groceries and going out to dinner and how that changed.

Ringel: Okay. I have a lot of digestive issues -- and I'm a vegan -- and I had not gone out to dinner for fun in many years. So that was easy to give up. The only times I went out to dinner with friends, I'd be sitting there picking at a salad while they ate. And after a while I just stopped doing that. So that was not an issue. Shopping for groceries, it was very easy for me to switch over to curbside pickup. I have a food co-op that only sells healthy food. They shut down for much longer than the rest of the state. They were shut down for March through June of 2020. And even when they did reopen to shoppers, they reopened with precautions that they still maintain. And so, I've had nothing but curbside pickup. Target does curbside pickup for anything that's not food. So, it's been very easy for me not to go into a store since 2020.

Moran: Yeah. I can believe it. Can you tell me anything else you remember about the spring of 2020--

Ringel: A lot.

Moran: --those first few months.

Ringel: Okay. One of the reasons that I accepted that the world had changed quickly was that I'm an expert in apocalyptic fiction and film. This is one of the things that I have written about in my academic career, and I've been a fan of post-apocalyptic and apocalyptic films since I was a child. So, I've always been expecting this. Somewhere in the back of my mind, that whole spring I kept waiting for the zombies. Because I knew that the next step was going to be zombies. [laughs] And seriously, I know Stephen King and I've written about him, interviewed him for years. The Stand at first seemed – I really did expect things to be much more like The Stand. That is, to escalate and to wipe out 99% of the population of the Earth. Now, consciously did I really expect this? No. But subconsciously? Absolutely. I just felt like, okay, this is it. This is the way the world ends.

Moran: So as this was going on, where were you turning for information? Where did you find reliable information?

Ringel: Mostly from the CDC [Center for Disease Control and Prevention] and watching Dr. Fauci and reading government sites and comparing those with international sites.

Moran: Gotcha. And what did you learn early on? Do you remember any details really making an impression on you?

Ringel: Oh yes. I learned that just like in The Stand, the government didn't really have a clue what was going on. They weren't doing the right things to react to it. I saw the immediate crazy conspiracy theories and I saw Trump's reaction to it, and I said, no, we're on our own here. I really admire Governor Lamont for trying to keep Connecticut sane, as much as possible. Our own Mayor in Norwich, Peter Nystrom, I never thought that he had it in him to step up the way he did, but he did. So, I was – I also blamed the government for caving into pressure to reopen too early. And again, and again. To lift mask mandates too early. Eventually my best source of information was from Yale and their School of Public Health, which began running a series of really informational things about safety for arts organizations like mine. Like the Norwich Arts Center. Hearing from engineers about the right way to work on ventilation and upgrading and really good, good factual information from the School of Public Health.

Moran: Can we talk a little bit about the Arts Center? I think it would be useful to just give a brief history of it. What you guys were doing before the pandemic and what role you play.

Ringel: Well, the Norwich Arts Center just celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary. I was among the founders. I was the first President in 1987. I am co-President now in 2022, which seems somehow very fitting. It was exactly half my life ago. I was President at 35

and I'm President at 70. We own a historic building in downtown Norwich and have been providing art exhibits in our gallery and theater and music performances in our theater for all that time. I was – I stepped away from it for a while, in the middle there, when I was busy at work, but after retirement I became very active again and have served on the board. Served as Program Chair and produced many of the shows in the theater since 2013 or thereabouts. In 2019, we had our best year ever. 2019 through the beginning of 2020, we had more shows and the largest crowds that we've ever drawn. [Sighs] And then it all came crashing down. I was in rehearsal for two separate shows that were scheduled for April and June in 2020. And of course, those ended, and we never even tried to revive them. So, we shut down completely until June 2021. But when we reopened, I was still producer, but I was producer of nothing. At first, no one really wanted to come back. And we didn't have any proposals for shows so we kind of limped along. I still wasn't going into the theater. Except to drop things off or pick things up or whatever. We had our first successful show. A play that had been scheduled for earlier in late March of this spring. People were starting to come back – and then this latest surge hit and May stuff fell off the cliff again. So I don't know. But I have been extremely active from my desk writing grants and I – we managed to get – thank god for the Connecticut Office of the Arts and CT Humanities with the special operating grants and other grants during the pandemic because otherwise we literally would not have been able to pay our mortgage or keep the lights on.

Moran: Do you want to say anything else about the challenges of staying solvent during all of this?

Ringel: Oh yes. We are an all-volunteer organization, and we have no paid staff, which means that we were not eligible for a lot of the loans and grants that were out there. No PPP's [Paycheck Protection Program] for us because we had no P's to protect. It also meant that a lot of our volunteers were like me -- they refused to come back. So, we've been operating putting an incredible strain on just a few volunteers. There are people who are still willing to come to shows, but nowhere near the crowds that we used to draw. The artists have been just noble. I mean during the shutdown they were doing online exhibits. Even though for many of them, they were completely non-technological. They had a hard time taking photos of their own work, let alone putting them on the web. But they did. They kept going all through the shutdown. And again, at reopening. Whether people have come to their exhibits or not, they have had an exhibit up every month. Of course, it's been a challenge.

Moran: Yeah. Well, do you want to talk at all about the decision to reopen and start -- keep the organization going and to start having in-person events again? How you guys reached that decision.

Ringel: That was a big – I mean we were having all our board meetings over zoom, as you might expect. We have one board member who was an enthusiastic Trump supporter and

anti-vaxxer and so on. He was trying to get it reopened from January 2021 and he finally got his way for June 2021. As you can guess it was against my advice, but as it turned out, the question of transmission was moot because from June through October of 2021, there was basically nobody -- or almost nobody -- in the theater. In October things were just starting to recover and then the Omicron [variant] hit. We shut down again December, January, February, and then reopened again in March [2022].

Moran: It came up a couple of times, zoom meetings and virtual art performances and I was curious how you used the internet during the pandemic.

Ringel: I have lived on the internet during the pandemic. I have run board meetings for six separate nonprofits.

Moran: Wow.

Ringel: I'm on a lot of boards. I've turned myself -- the least technological person -- I've educated myself to where I can run zoom meetings. Or at least do the minimum that's required. I wrote a book and published it all during the pandemic. I was commissioned in June 2020 and it just came out. Let me show you.

Moran: The Gothic Literature and History of New England.

Ringel: The Gothic Literature and History of New England: Secrets of the Restless Dead.

Moran: That's a great title.

Ringel: It's in the International Gothic series of a British academic press called Anthem. It was commissioned -- I've been, I mean my publishing has all been in the academic world and I had worked with the editor years before and out of the blue she contacted me and commissioned this book. Which is part of the International Gothic series about regional gothics all over the world. My previous book publication was also on this subject. That was in 1995. So back then it took me three years of traveling around to libraries and archives and everything to write. And this time, everything was online. Everything I needed was available, either digitized already or if it was a new work, it was something I could order. And so, I wrote this one without leaving the house. And I've also had a number of other scholarly publications that I've started on. That are due. I've got one that's due in July that is about the comic turn in the Jewish Gothic tradition. And then I've just proposed a paper -- it hasn't been written yet -- on plague apocalypses in fiction and film. [laughs]

Moran: That's on topic.

Ringel: Yes, exactly.

Moran: It sounds like. No, sorry, go ahead. I cut you off.

Ringel: That in turn grew out of -- there was an online conference, a really major international conference in March 2021, where I did a paper in that general area. Since then I've been meeting every Sunday with a group of international gothic scholars.

Moran: Oh wow.

Ringel: From Taiwan and Thailand. Russia. The UK. Canada. We meet every Sunday morning.

Moran: That's great. That's an excellent year.

Ringel: Also, during that time, I used to be an active volunteer with the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festival. They canceled it, of course, in 2020. And again in 2021. And then announced that they weren't planning to revive it. That they were just going to cancel it permanently. So a group of us including performers, former Mystic Seaport employees, and volunteers, formed a new nonprofit -- completely via zoom and online -- have met this whole year and we are presenting The Connecticut Sea Music Festival June 10-12.

Moran: That's a beautiful logo.

Ringel: Isn't it gorgeous? The mermaid. It's going to be in Essex. And again, my role was writing grants and doing the nonprofit organizing and doing publicity and arranging for toilets and renting buses and all of the other things that I've done online. And organizing an academic symposium on the music of the sea, which is going to be an international one that I am zoom mastering on Friday the 10th. But I am not going to be at the festival.
[laughs]

Moran: The in-person.

Ringel: Yeah.

Moran: Got you. But the virtual component sounds very robust. You're able to attract a lot of international participants.

Ringel: Exactly. Which we had never done. The symposium, I've been working on directing since 2008, but it was only in person in a pretty small space.

Moran: Well, it sounds like you've been able to stay really active using virtual spaces. I guess one of the things that getting back to the more domestic Covid issues, I was curious how you view this balance of personal choice and collective responsibility in a pandemic.

Ringel: Well, that's a good question. And I think collective responsibility wins out every time. Another area of my interest is the pandemic of 1918. Something that I haven't published about but I have done papers about in the past. I saw two things from that that I'm seeing right now again. I saw that then the government had more power. It seemed to enforce quarantine restrictions and enforce mask wearing. And there was more public shaming of anyone who didn't. But at the same time, I saw lots of resistance. There were

demonstrations back then against this government invasion. The other thing that I swear I'm so glad you're doing this project, there was a real concerted effort to forget and cover up beginning in 1920. There was the personal, just traumatized, we don't talk about it. The reactions of many of the people who went through it or lost someone was similar to what happened after the Holocaust where survivors would just not talk about it and they wouldn't tell their families. No, no, we have to put that behind us. And there were I don't think anyone has revealed the extent of the coverup by more official sources. One example that I was actually involved in was a masked grave in Terryville, CT near Bristol. There was a Roman Catholic cemetery and Nick Bellantoni the state archeologist I have worked with sometimes got a call from a woman who was doing her family genealogy and she said, I have a grandmother that I cannot find. I know she died in 1981 but I cannot find out where she was buried. The death certificate doesn't list it. I don't know where she was, but I think she was a member of this Roman Catholic Church in Terryville, so I'm pretty sure she would have been buried there. With a combination of paper detective work and an actual visit to the site with ground penetrating radar, lidar, discovered a whole mass grave of 1918 bodies that had just never been listed. There was no record. How many more times did that happen?

Moran: Wow. That's incredible. And did you say when this was located?

Ringel: This would have been the first decade of this century.

Moran: Gotcha. I've got to look more into that cause that was not one I knew.

Ringel: That's the other thing. The coverup continued. The church removed permission to do any further investigation. And refused to allow any publication.

Moran: Really? Wow. That's quite a story. I'm curious just if you wanted to speak anecdotally about other comparisons or things you learned about the 1918 experience because it is, as far as I can tell, the closest historic equivalent.

Ringel: Yes. Well, there was so little literature that mentions it. When you think of it, everybody refers to the one publication – Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse Pale Rider*. It ought to be in Hemingway and Fitzgerald. It ought to be in Eugene O'Neil. It ought to be in the plays and everything of the time. And it isn't! It ought to be in all of the – I know that I did some World War I research for the commemoration in 1918. A library series. I'm no historian. I'm a literature person. I did some research in the contemporary accounts of Americans in World War I and after and there's never a word! Even though this is something that became an epidemic among the troops in 1917 and into 1918. It's as though it never happened.

Moran: Do you get a sense of something similar happening with Covid?

Ringel: Now it's much harder because there are so many media sources. The question is, how much of today's evanescent media will be preserved? Who is going to be able to read

Facebook twenty years from now – let alone a hundred years from now. Who is going to be able to read blogs or all the many, many different online sources? That's what's different. We can read Hemingway and Fitzgerald and we can read the newspapers of that era because they've been digitized. We can read the scripts of plays. But I mean even the movies – and I know from my plague apocalypse thing, there are still fewer plague apocalypse films that reflect the reality of Covid than there are zombie movies and what I call the displacement ones. Like A Silent Place or others where there's this mysterious thing that makes everyone blind. This mysterious thing that makes everyone deaf. Or there's a monster that can hear your footsteps. There's a lot more movies like that. Because until now the plague pandemic movies were more like Outbreak [breaks up] or Contagion where you have the heroic researcher who discovers the cure. Even though everyone's been dying practically -- overnight, everything's fine.

Moran: Of course. That's a great transition, actually, to the next question, which is how did you feel when you first heard about the vaccine?

Ringel: Well, at first – I mean, I thought that maybe – maybe! – it's the answer. They were pretty pessimistic even from the beginning. I read enough things even when it came out to be cautious. This is not necessarily a panacea. It'll be more like the flu shot where you have to keep taking it. It's not like the polio vaccine where you're going to be protected for the rest of your life or whatever. Of course, I didn't believe the conspiracy theories and the anti-vaxxers and those people, but I certainly thought that continued caution was going to be necessary. And I was right.

Moran: So did you get vaccinated early on?

Ringel: I did. And just my luck -- remember it was really hard to get appointments in February and March of 2021. The only appointment that I could get was in Hartford, which I hated because I had to drive so far. I get there expecting to get the Moderna, and they said, we just got a shipment of Johnson & Johnson and that's what we're giving. So of course, soon after that all the negative press started coming out about J&J and you can be sure that my two boosters were both Moderna. As if I didn't have enough to worry about, I had no reaction whatsoever to any of the shots. Not to the initial one and not to either of the boosters. Barely a sore arm. Of course, with all my friends and everyone else on Facebook reporting, I'm so sick, it's like having Covid, whatever. Now I've always been worrying, gee, am I protected? [laughs]

Moran: Who knows what that means, yeah. What were your thoughts on vaccine mandates? Do you agree with vaccine mandates?

Ringel: Oh, from the beginning. That was the one thing that I wished for. I remember thinking from the beginning, unless there's a vaccine mandate, people are not going to get it voluntarily. And I was proved wrong. A good percentage did get it voluntarily. But we know that in many places, I was right.

Moran: What about mask mandates? Do you have similar thoughts about those?

Ringel: Absolutely. I think they were lifted far too soon. And for no reason. For no clinical reason. Just at the pressure of businesses and individuals. There's no evidence whatsoever that being in crowded spaces without a mask is safe. There never was such evidence.

Moran: I guess I'm just curious if there were any other notable events from 2020 that you want to speak about. I know it was a busy year.

Ringel: By coincidence one of the secrets of the restless dead, I decided even before the Black Lives Matter protests peaked in the summer of 2020 that I wanted to focus on New England's cover up of slavery. That New England has this gothic history of slavery that either actively denied, buried, or came out in displaced ways as the horror of these revenging black people. And then the Black Lives Matter protests hit and suddenly it became something that was not just a 19th Century concern anymore, but very much a 21st Century concern. As I was writing, Rhode Island decided to drop the words "and Providence Plantations" from its state name. Universities suddenly began acknowledging the history of slavery. Connecticut's Witness Stones project is a deliberate attempt to physically commemorate these sites. That would be my one connection. Other than that, I never joined a protest. I actually couldn't. The anxiety was too high for me to even watch crowds or even think about it, so, I kind of distanced myself from that side of 2020.

Moran: Did you pay much attention to the election happening that year?

Ringel: Yeah, except in a depressing way. I actually did a paper for an online conference in 2020 about Trump as a chaos monster. It was in the monsters and monstrous section of the Popular Culture Association meeting. Long before he became President, he figures in a number of horror stories and science fiction stories as a monster. And all those predictions came true. [laughs] I was never so relieved in my life as when Biden won.

Moran: Do you remember anything about the events of January 6, 2021?

Ringel: Oh yes. I remember that I was deep in my writing and a friend called me and said, do you have the TV on? Of course not, I'm writing. She said, turn on the TV. And after that, I was glued to the coverage because there, too, I thought, okay, this is it. This is the start of the revolution. The revolution will be televised. There's going to be blood in the streets. Being a survivor of the late sixties. [Sighs] And thank god I was wrong about that one. I mean, as terrible as it was, it did not lead to widespread insurrections. Which is strange, but it didn't.

Moran: Looking forward, how do you think the Covid pandemic "ends"?

Ringel: Well, on the hopeful side, it will be more like the 1918 and come back periodically until it just finally goes into -- and becomes endemic. There were outbreaks in 1919, 1920 and then somehow after that, no. I understand that some of the DNA of that 1918 flu made

its way into what we call the common cold. The Coronavirus. That's another Coronavirus. That's the hopeful one. The not hopeful one is that it's going to mutate into a worse form and we're going to have a worse round. Not just another surge, but something worse.

Moran: How do you feel about this "new normal"?

Ringel: I haven't accepted the new normal. I'm still in the old normal. The old pandemic. Personally, I realize that I'm just going – again, consciously I realize that I'm going to have to do something about this. I'm not a fan of psychotherapy or anti-anxiety drugs. At age seventy, I'm on no prescription drugs whatsoever. That's the conscious thing.

Subconsciously, there's a little voice going I told you so, I told you so. There's just not much to tempt me out. I am single. I have a lot of friends that I see online and a few that I at least visited with outside and occasionally in the house. And lots of friends all over the world that I wouldn't be seeing anyway. I just have a very – there's very little to tempt me out. [laughs]

Moran: Do you want to talk at all about how those relationships have changed or been affected by the pandemic?

Ringel: Well mostly that I haven't been able to help. I've always been a helper. I've always been an active volunteer. Until actually before the pandemic and other things happened. But I had spent twenty-five years working at least once a month at the local soup kitchen. I had always been an outreach volunteer and someone who could always be relied on for help. That I miss. It's not the same just giving money or trying to help in other ways.

Moran: Yeah, that's very fair. But it sounds like using digital platforms, would you say you've made more friendships or new friendships over the course of Covid?

Ringel: Definitely. Definitely. As I said, more international friendships. That kind of community. People that, the gothic scholars some of whom I hadn't seen since 2007 in person and suddenly we're "seeing" each other every week. [laughs]

Moran: That symposium community seems like a really healthy use of digital spaces. So it sounds like at no point you haven't caught Covid.

Ringel: No.

Moran: Did anyone you know catch Covid? Can you talk about it?

Ringel: Yeah. I've had rounds of testing because some of my closest friends were either exposed or got it. And one of my closest friends, her and her family went through a real siege at the end of December. I had spent a little bit of time in their house like a week before, but it didn't come to anything. Now it seems like she's going through it again. She's got a whole new round of symptoms. Her husband's in the navy. The first time he brought it home from the sub. It was a sub that had to return to port because of an outbreak and then he goes home and gives it to the whole family. He was out at sea for a long time, and they

just had the commissioning ceremony and now she's got the symptoms again. It's ranged from some friends who have had very mild cases. I do have one acquaintance, not really a friend, who was first to get it in March 2020 and had Long Covid and has not shaken it. But she had really acute Long Covid for almost a year.

Moran: Yeah, I hear about that lasting for quite a while.

Ringel: I don't know anyone who was hospitalized or died. I mean, I know of people, but no actual acquaintances. The closest was someone from my synagogue. The husband and wife were – are – in their eighties and were real Covid deniers. They got the vaccine, but in the summer of 2021, they were going everywhere and going to crowds and trying to press for starting in person synagogue services again. And both of them got really bad cases. Both hospitalized. The wife had permanent damage. Could never walk again. It certainly disrupted their lives. They had been going back and forth to Florida. They would come from Florida to here. Their son moved them both down to Florida to an assisted living place. So that's the only example I know of a really bad outcome. And my synagogue did start up hybrid services. I actually belong to two synagogues. Both have now gone hybrid. And neither one is attracting any kind of crowd to the in-person part. [laughs] No social distancing problems because they're only getting three to five people. I've been leading services on zoom for both synagogues at times. [unintelligible audio] I would say that's another change in my life is that I've become almost a full-time lay leader at a number of different synagogues. [laughs]

Moran: Wow. Do you want to talk about how that helped your experience of the pandemic.

Ringel: Oh definitely. The communities – especially the community at Temple Bnai Israel in Willimantic have just been incredibly supportive and they all really appreciate the services that I lead and the service that I am providing by doing this. There's a lot of people are coming on who never set foot in the physical structure and people who moved away and live in other parts of the country and there's no doubt that the zoom religious services have just been a wonderful, wonderful aspect. I look forward to Friday night and Saturday morning every week.

Moran: More generally, has your approach to mental health changed during the pandemic?

Ringel: No. I was always pretty much an anti-psychotherapy person. [laughs] Many, many years ago after a divorce I went to a recommended counseling session and in the first counseling session I said to her, I think you have to really believe in this for it to work. Just like people who believe in witch doctors. It works for them. She said to me, you're calling me a witch doctor? I said, not exactly. And that was the last time we met. [laughs] But what I have seen, seriously, is for others who on the one hand it's been really great to be able to have telehealth consultations. I have a friend who has suffered from intractable depression for years. She was dumped by a number of psychotherapists because she couldn't make appointments. She was saying, but I'm depressed. I can't get out of bed.

You're going to dump me because I couldn't make an appointment because I'm depressed? And so being able to have telehealth counseling has just been a boon for a lot of people. Telemedicine, an idea whose time had come a long time ago and now finally it's happening. But at the same time, there's so little. There's not enough counselling available in any form for young people. A friend's having trouble with her teenage children and not able to access care. Another friend had a suicide attempt by one of her children and they couldn't admit him to the hospital because there wasn't a bed. There wasn't a bed anywhere in Connecticut.

Moran: That's terrible.

Ringel: Yes. And it's only going to get worse as we saw in Uvalde [Texas]. Where are all those traumatized children going to be treated?

Moran: I was curious if there's anything else you wanted to speak to about your day-to-day practices or exercise or anything you started doing or that helped you get through the last few years?

Ringel: Not really. It's been mostly writing and reading.

Moran: Gotcha. And did you have any specific – obviously the book you wrote is a big achievement. Did you have any specific books that you were reading that were helping you--

Ringel: Yes!

Moran: --feel more solid and grounded?

Ringel: Yeah. In the first month. In the really scary month. I reread Stephen King's *The Stand*. Ah well, it could be worse sort of thing. Then I went on a round of reading more apocalyptic fiction. Everything from asteroids to global warming to whatever. Again, that's something that always makes me feel better. And horror in general. I have so many friends who write horror. That's the other thing. I had never published fiction. I've written a few stories and one story I swear was cursed because it was placed in 2016 with an anthology that was under a curse. Went through two publishers, three different sets of editors, and they finally pulled the plug on it this past spring. Early this spring. Okay authors, you've got your stories back. And within a week I had placed with another anthology. Which so far, knock wood, is not cursed. And which was a publication of the Rhode Island chapter of the Horror Writers Association, which I joined as an academic member. I was going, why didn't I do this years ago? This is such fun. [laughs] I don't know. I may write some more fiction.

Moran: That's great. That sounds like – do you get a sense that in your fiction you were relating your experiences?

Ringel: Well not that story. That story was about the Rhode Island belief, which was Connecticut, too. The discoveries that were made in Griswold of the vampire grave there. I don't know if you know this whole story.

Moran: Yeah. Do you want to relate it for the record?

Ringel: Sure. Well, there was in New England -- and it turns out throughout the Northeast -- a native belief in a revenant, that is a physical returner from the grave that was connected with consumption. Tuberculosis. This was tagged vampire belief, but that was never the word used by the people who actually practiced this folk medical practice that believed that consumption was spread by your dead relatives not being able to rest easy in the grave after dying of consumption and coming back to drain the life force of their remaining surviving relatives. And the only way to solve this was to in some way kill the dead. To exhume the bodies, discover the one that had -- was the cause. Perhaps fresh blood in the heart or lungs that hadn't decayed or who knows what else. And to remove those organs and burn them and in some cases force the survivors to drink medicine made from those ashes.

Moran: Wow.

Ringel: On the one hand, they usually died. But on the other, because of the way tuberculosis is spread, it mostly ended the particular outbreak when everyone in that family was dead. [laughs] So you could say that it worked. I had been writing about this since the nineteen-sixties, but for a long time it was believed that this was some kind of folk tale and that it never actually happened. Until in 1990 there was a discovery of an abandoned -- an inadvertent discovery of an abandoned graveyard in Griswold, CT where there was a burial in keeping with this narrative where a body had been disarranged after death. The ribcage broken into and strewn around. The body recomposed with the skull turned downward and the bones recomposed into a skull and crossbones effect. And then large field stones piled on top of the grave. That's the story. The famous such outbreak, the one that got the name "vampire" attached to it firmly was in Rhode Island in 1892.

Moran: Wow.

Ringel: Yeah. At that point there was worldwide media coverage of it. Reporters saying that this is the proof of the survival of an ancient vampire belief and so on. So, my story was about that. Is about that. It's called Mary's Mama's Heart.

Moran: Awesome. I'll keep an eye out. I was wondering if you had any other specific experiences you wanted to talk about relating to Norwich, to the arts organization.

Ringel: Yes. I hope that you'll have a chance to interview LaShawn Cunningham but thanks to the pandemic I've been able to work with this extraordinary woman, LaShawn Cunningham, who founded on her own a nonprofit called Blooming Into Greatness. She approached NAC [Norwich Arts Center] during the shutdown and asked if she could have

rehearsal space there for her dancers. And something that we granted. I mean we had actually upgraded the ventilation in the theater before that but weren't ready to reopen to the public. I worked out a program with her that we offered to the Norwich Public Schools. They – NAC has done programs with Norwich Public Schools for years and way back they used to bus schoolkids to us. Then that came to be too expensive, so we were sending artists and poets and writers into the schools doing after school programs. That of course all shutdown in 2020. So, in January 2021, February 2021, they put out a call for proposals to resume after school enrichment programs. LaShawn and I created this program called Dancing Our Heritage which was LaShawn and her dancers teaching African and Haitian and Native American and other dance forms. And me telling stories. Folktales from those areas. We were able to do it. It took a while to get up and running. We had a lot of technical difficulties, which we got around somehow. We presented that in the spring of 2021 to kids ranging in age from second grade through fifth grade. Which turned out to be a little too young for what we wanted to do, but boy did they love the stories. That was the most amazing thing. That these kids who were so tech savvy. Were sitting on their screens all day. Or even once they were in school, they were surrounded by the most high-tech thing, what they really loved was hearing stories.

Moran: I mean there's a timeless appeal, right?

Ringel: Yes.

Moran: We've been doing that a lot longer than we've been doing anything else.

Ringel: Yeah. It's like, Miss Faye, you have the most amazing stories. And we are talking about really, really old stories. The Anansi the spider tales. The people could fly from the Old South. The wisdom tales from India. More spider tales from Haiti.

Moran: That's great. So, one of the last questions we go through that are more abstract questions and they're just rapid fire so you can shoot from the hip on these. The first one I wanted to ask was, is there something that you lost during the pandemic?

Ringel: Confidence in the future.

Moran: Is there anything that you found during the pandemic?

Ringel: My online voice.

Moran: That's great. Can you define the pandemic in one word?

Ringel: Inevitable.

Moran: What was the greatest lesson that you have learned?

Ringel: That despite my pessimistic outlook, I can still survive.

Moran: And how do you think you changed during the pandemic?

Ringel: Fear. Allowing fear to control – fear and anxiety to take control. They were always there, but this allowed them to come out and play.

Moran: And what advice would you give someone who experiences a future pandemic?

Ringel: Listen to the government.

Moran: What is your hope for the future?

Ringel: My hope is that it will become like the common cold. Which can also be prevented by masking!

Moran: And what else do you want people to know about your experience during the pandemic?

Ringel: I don't know. I don't know where to start. Reading about the plague pandemics and how they've been reflected in film and popular culture might interest people in the future.

Moran: What role do you see that playing, those popular culture reflections?

Ringel: Well, the movie that – as we know – the movie that has captured what really happened the best is Don't Look Up. It's so far the only one that seems to have dealt with the widespread denying of truth and the widespread conspiracy theories that have become mainstream. I like to think that there will be more such satires. If we can't deal with those folks in a rational way, maybe we can laugh at them.

Moran: We'll always have that. Did you have any other topics you wanted to discuss? That you wanted to talk about while we're on the record about Covid or about the last two years and everything that's happened during it?

Ringel: Not really. I think I'm talked out. [laughs]

Moran: Well, thank you.