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Jordan (alumni guest):

It's an old saying that I've heard before, which is that no one steps in the same river twice because it's not the same river and it's also not the same person. And I think that that really speaks nicely to what this story is, that it's a story, it's a snapshot in time of an ever changing place, but it's also a portrait of ever changing people. And I am one of those ever changing people. We all are those ever changing people. So the river changes every day, but we also change with it.

Vivian (host):

Hello everyone. Welcome to Meet Princeton, a podcast to introduce prospective students and their families to Princeton University, brought to you from the Office of Admission at Princeton. My name is Vivian Slee and I'm a senior assistant dean in the Office of Admission. And I'm so happy that you tuned in to join us to hear from current student voices and others about our community and about what it's like to be a student at Princeton just now. Hi Bryant. How are you?

Bryant (co-host):

I'm well, how are you? Happy New Year, as we say around these parts.

Vivian (host):

Yeah, it's a new school year. Very exciting.

Bryant (co-host):

It's here before we knew it.

Vivian (host):

Yeah, as it always is, I think. And coming back, I guess one of the things, the first things that happens is the pre-read and just wanted to ask you if you could tell our listeners what is a pre-read?

Bryant (co-host):

Well, a pre-read, I mean at this point I think we're able to use the article, the pre-read. This is now a long standing Princeton tradition that is a really exciting one that welcomes undergraduates. It's sponsored by the office of the president, President Eisgruber welcomes new students and the larger university community to join him in this journey of intellectual exploration and read a book together, which then becomes kind of the cornerstone of early year programming discussion and hopefully again, sort of sets the tone for incoming students about the type of experience this will be intellectually for them as they arrive. In 2013, the class of 2017 joined Chris Eisgruber in the very first selection, *The Honor Code*, authored by Kwame Anthony Appiah. And every year following, he issued another sort of invitation and selected another book that again, is sent to every first year student, that the university community is invited to join in. This year's selection, however, is a little different one, a little fun for our community.

Vivian (host):

Yeah, definitely.

Bryant (co-host):

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For the class of 2026, the book is actually authored by a Princeton alum, Jordan Salama, class of 2019, whose book is titled Every Day the River Changes. And it details his four weeks down the Magdalena River.

Vivian (host):

That is so cool. I've actually read the book. Really, really enjoyed it. I have a slight bias towards anything to do with Colombia because as you know, my family is Colombian. So very much enjoyed it. And I think for a lot of Colombians there is this deep connection to the Magdalena River. What happens after you read it? Do you get into, you meet with groups, with President Eisgruber, or do you discuss it with your peers?

Bryant (co-host):

Yeah, so as I alluded to, in the summer of a student's first year before they arrive on campus, they're actually sent this book and given a heads up, this is something that again, as a sort of collective community, there's an expectation of reading it. I think, I don't know if I think of this as mandatory. I think the opportunity to be at Princeton and to join this intellectual... it's more the community in some ways, it's sort of this great enterprise of learning that people are eager to join, I think. This is the invitation to take that first step. And I think most people are really enthusiastic about that. And so they hop right in. There are some other activities during the students' first week on campus where they are in smaller groups and bonding. And I think this is one of the things that actually is discussed a little bit to precede the president's welcome talk and then subsequent address.

And what happens is they have this large assembly where this year was actually held in Jadwin Gym, so that our entire class, which is the largest ever, could be together to hear the president speaking with Jordan. A discussion format, but moderated largely by our university president. Students actually asked questions at that event. They were able to come to the mic and speak with the author and the president, and then they returned to the residential colleges where they did a debrief. And so again, they sort get to reflect on that conversation, on the book that they've read, on their own thoughts. And in a way, again, this is the Princeton educational experience is modeled where this, where you'll be a lecture and then subsequent to the lecture you'll break up into smaller classes that at Princeton, we call them precepts, and have these engaging conversations with a smaller group of your peers, classmates, and instructors.

And so this is, I think the model that is followed and gives folks an opportunity to have that reflection and engagement. And then as I said, there's the opportunity, as the president makes it a point of emphasis, to make himself available for these conversations. And he rotates through the now seven residential colleges where he will join groups of students in this discussion. And I think that's another really cool thing that highlights the Princeton experience, that this engagement at Princeton, you get directly with great faculty, with leaders in their fields, with our own university president. And...

Vivian (host):

Sure.

Bryant (co-host):

That's I think what follows from the summer invitation to join this community.

Vivian (host):

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Right, absolutely. And I'm very excited because on this podcast, actually, following our conversation right now, we're going to hear my lovely colleague Emma Parrish, class of 21, in conversation with Jordan Salama. So really hope that our listeners will stick around to hear that conversation. Jordan actually started this book, the kernel of this book came from his senior thesis, and I believe he then developed it working with editors and publishing house and so on. Now, you said earlier you said this isn't your typical pre-read book. Why is that?

Bryant (co-host):

I think even the president would acknowledge this, but the previous books have been largely by tenured faculty members in different respects. I think I mentioned the first one, but other books for example, have been books on important topics, but by... so, the book a few years ago, one of them was called *Speak Freely*, and that's was by Princeton University professor Keith Whittington, about sort of the principles of free speech in an academic community. We've had *Whistling Vivaldi*, which was by a Columbia professor, Claude Steele, that was about sort of stereotypes and sociological sort of explorations and thinkings about assumptions and biases. We've had things like *This America* by Harvard professor Jill Lepore, and Chris Eisgruber himself is a constitutional scholar by nature. So you can see the types of books that might actually have also...

Vivian (host):

Right, right.

Bryant (co-host):

Appealed to him. And this book.

Vivian (host):

Yeah.

Bryant (co-host):

Again, Jordan Solama's book is one I think that is actually in some ways more accessible to students. I think it was written by him when essentially he was a student. He began it when he was a student and it's less scholarly in the sort of sense of the other books. But I think it's really Princeton, it's really important. It sort of thinks about taking risks, about not just doing safe things, of stretching yourself, of the opportunities, again, that a Princeton education I think exemplifies. So in that regard, while it's not the typical pre-read book necessarily as we've seen it over the past almost decade, it is I think a really prototypical Princeton book in the way that it sort of speaks to the experience and the opportunities that this education offers.

Emma (interviewer):

Well, hello, Jordan, thank you so much for coming to talk with us about your book, the Princeton pre-read, *Every Day The River Changes*. It's so exciting to see you in person.

Jordan (alumni guest):

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Yeah, it's so great to be with you, Emma. I'm really happy to be here. Thank you for the invitation. And isn't it pretty cool that we're here having this conversation together after being at Princeton together just a few years ago?

Emma (interviewer):

It is awesome and a little bit hard to believe. So I'd love to just jump in and ask if you can tell us about yourself and what was the inspiration for the topic of your book.

Jordan (alumni guest):

Definitely. So my name is Jordan Salama. I graduated from Princeton in 2019, and right now I'm a resident writer at National Geographic. I tell stories about the world, about history and culture, people and nature. And so in that theme, this book, *Every Day The River Changes*, is the story of my journey down Colombia's great Rio Magdalena, the most important river in that country. And I think that the inspiration for it came in a lot of different ways, but at its heart, I mean, I knew that I wanted to write a story about a river because I'm interested in how rivers have this unique ability to connect disparate peoples and cultures and identities and experiences. You can live on one end of the thing in another, but the one constant thing that is there is that brown, murky water and the sediment it carries throughout. So I knew I wanted to write about a river. I knew that I was interested in Colombia as this kind of vastly diverse country of people and landscapes and species and communities, and it kind of just went from there.

Emma (interviewer):

That's wonderful. And I think hearing you talk about the river being something that brings us all together is incredibly relevant for having your book as the Princeton pre-read. And so all first year students are coming together at Princeton and they have this shared experience of having read your book. And so can you tell us about what it means to have your book as the Princeton pre-read, and what do you hope students will take away from the book and from their pre-read discussions?

Jordan (alumni guest):

Maybe at first glance they might say, Why am I reading this random book about a river in Colombia by this kid, basically, who wrote it not too long ago when he was a student in college? But I think that's the key. I think that one of the reasons, or I hope one of the reasons why President Eisgruber chose the book. Is because it might potentially show a student or an incoming student what all of the possibilities are with one's time at a school like Princeton. And honestly at a school anywhere. I think that when you go to college, when you leave high school and you enter a university experience, suddenly you have all these new possibilities and classes that you can take in different subjects that you might not have been able to explore in high school and explore something like narrative non-fiction, for example, which was something that I had no exposure to when I was 16, 17, 18 years old.

It took taking those kinds of writing classes here at Princeton to realize, wow, I can make a career out of meeting people who are interesting, listening to their experiences, and telling their stories. So I think that students reading this book could perhaps read it in a different way and say, What is the river of my life, maybe, if you will, what is the path that I'm thinking about taking? But how are all of the different ways that that could change along the way and what are those endless possibilities that I want to explore? What are my passions? How am I spending my time in a way that's meaningful, with purpose and with impact? And I think that not only the story of the book, of how it came together, but also the

stories of a lot of the individuals who I met along the river Magdalena kind of encapsulated those themes and ideas and hopefully come through in the story itself.

Emma (interviewer):

I think that's incredibly inspiring, something that I definitely relate to, this idea of seeing college as a time to explore and find new passions. And I think that that's something that perspective students can learn a lot about. And I would love to hear more about the process of writing your senior thesis and then turning that into a book that is now the pre-read. And if you could talk about the support that you got in terms of financial resources, in terms of advising from Princeton along the way.

Jordan (alumni guest):

Okay, I'll level with you here. I didn't really even know what a senior thesis was when I was applying to colleges. I didn't know necessarily what that meant. And even when I got to Princeton, I thought that it had to be something very, very academic and formal and kind of buttoned up. And this needs to be like you're a professor and you're writing a paper. But what I realized very quickly coming to a place like Princeton and reading about all the experiences that other students were having who were older than me, was that a senior thesis could take so many different forms. I learned about people many, many years ago, decades ago, who actually started television shows from ideas that they had during their senior thesis, people whose senior theses became books, sure, but also people whose senior theses became companies or non-profits. Like, basically you're given this year to work on a project.

And I realized very quickly that if you are given that much time with kind of free reign to focus and immerse yourself in one specific thing, I wanted to do something that would have meaning after I graduated, something that I could say, I did this while I was in school, but I'm now taking this into the world and making it my own. And at first I thought that what I would be writing about, the Magdalena River, would be a collection of encounters where if I was lucky, maybe one of them I'd be able to sell to a newspaper or magazine somewhere and start a career as a freelance journalist. I did not think that I was writing a book, even when I was writing my senior thesis. It took the mentorship and the advice of several professors near the end of my senior year to really have that come together for me in my mind to realize, Yeah, you know what, I'm writing something that has a narrative thread, that my voice is important as are the voices of all the people who I interviewed, and that this could exist as one unified thing that people in a general audience of readers would be interested in taking in.

So the process of writing the senior thesis was very fluid, I think. And yeah, I mean to your second question about what kind of support and advising that I received, that's the other thing is I knew coming into Princeton is that this place has, we have the privilege as Princeton students to be able to have a lot of resources available to us in terms of funding for opportunities to travel. And that was something that I wanted to take advantage of wherever I was going to school, but especially if I had the chance to come to a place like Princeton. And so to every summer I could, I went abroad, especially to Latin America because I speak Spanish and I was interested in exploring places like Colombia, going back to Argentina where my family is from, and learning about myself by traveling far away and understanding my own identities by talking about the identities of other people. And I think that was a really important process for me while I was figuring out what exactly I wanted to write that last year.

Emma (interviewer):

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I would love to hear more about how you approached being in a new environment and meeting new people, and if you have an interaction that really stood out to you, there are so many in the book, if there's one that jumps out to you immediately that you'd like to share.

Jordan (alumni guest):

Definitely. I mean, I think that in my work as a journalist now for Nat Geo and some other places that I've written for like the New York Times, and Smithsonian, all these places where I've been writing stories for the last couple years about people I've met all over, whether it's near or far, I try to approach all of my interviews and interactions with the compassion that I would want if I were the one to be receiving somebody at my house who's knocking on my door random from some other place trying to learn about my life. So much of this book we call Travel Writing for a New Generation because it is the power of a journey with all of the respect and empathy and sensitivity that that should entail and without the kind of otherness that it could lean into if you're not careful. And so I approached being in these new environments, meeting these new people by finding these small bits of common experiences, whether that was through music, or soccer, or books that we like to read, or movies that we like to watch, these common cultural experiences that many of us share that could start a conversation that is what some people like to call small talk.

But I think small talk is really important for laying the groundwork for what are going to be deeper conversations. It's only small talk if it ends there, but really those are the first conversations we all have when we meet new people and they lay the foundation for the trust that is necessary to engage in a more meaningful conversation. And so I always wanted to make sure that what I was doing with the people who I was "interviewing" actually felt less like an interview and more like an exchange.

Emma (interviewer):

That's wonderful. And I feel like that piece of advice, kind of approaching small talk as a gateway for having deeper conversations, is something that students who are starting at college can really take away as they're meeting people from across the world who have different experiences from themselves. I think that's a great kind of entryway into forming deeper relationships.

Jordan (alumni guest):

Absolutely. I mean, that's such an important point here, right? Because I think one of the reasons why this book is the pre-read is also because in a way this is an agglomeration of students from all different backgrounds. And this is a book about the importance of having empathetic conversations, reaching across potential divides and different lived experiences and having conversations that are productive and meaningful and impactful and will lead to friendships that will carry on for the rest of people's lives. That's also the case with this book. It's like, okay, so many of these people who I met, they were not fleeting encounters that lasted for a couple hours or a couple days, and then I never heard from them again. With technology, I've kept in touch with many of these people over WhatsApp and Facebook and Instagram, and in the idea that those encounters deepened over the internet, let's say, after over long periods of time has been really beautiful in some ways.

Back to one of your other questions, which was one of my favorite interactions. I think that there's one person in this book who really inspires people. And when I was writing it, I didn't necessarily think about how much she would be inspiring people, but once it came out and I was hearing from readers and traveling around doing conversations with different libraries and book clubs, everybody seemed to kind of grab onto her story. And that is Alejandra Majorca, a great friend of mine now still today, who was the

woman... well, people haven't read the book. It was a woman who was the friend of a friend of a friend who was willing to accompany me at the very last minute on a boat called a chalupa that was very rickety, and cockroaches were falling out from the ceiling onto our laps while it was speeding down the Magdalena, one of the few possibilities that I had to travel the river by boat. And Alejandra had a scar on her arm, and I noticed it immediately when I met her, but I didn't say anything because again, respect. You don't, that's not something you ask somebody who you've just met for the first time is, What's that big scar on your arm? What's it from?

But I also know that she picked up on it, that I noticed it right at the beginning, because later on in our conversation, she said, So I saw you looking at the scar on my arm before. Do you want to know where it's from? And I lied, and I said something like, Oh no, I didn't notice that. I had no idea. But she said, No, no, no, no, you definitely noticed and I want to tell you the story. And she said, like this, she says, deadpan, I died once. And suddenly the conversation kind of turned very solemn, and we were sitting there on a river bank, the boat was stopped at a dock and people were loading on and off. But I was kind of enthralled by this conversation with her. And she said, I died once. And I said, Well, what do you mean?

And it turns out that she'd gotten into a car accident. She was a teenager, and she did. She lost consciousness. Her heart stopped many times and they had to revive her. And she said, I didn't see the light like people say, but I did have a very interesting dream, and it was that a nurse was leaning over me and all I wanted to ask was for my Coca-Cola, that it was going to be the most delicious Coca-Cola that I've ever had in my life. That's what I wanted. And then when I woke up and my mother was crying with joy, that I had finally come back to life as she put it, that I would live the rest of my life in search of that symbolic Coca-Cola, that sweetness, that joy that I was so craving, but maybe I didn't find early on because I was doing things the way that people told me I needed to do them and that I thought I should be doing, but that wasn't actually making me happy.

And so then that point was a real turning point for her in that she really changed her perspective on the way she was living. She started to take risks in ways that she hadn't before to live her life in her, the way that she felt was its fullest. And when you're a student of any kind and you're 21 years old and you're traveling down a river to try to write a long assignment for school, you're asking a lot of these kinds of questions of yourself. There's a lot of question marks in your life. What am I going to do after school? Maybe if you're in high school, the question is, where am I going to go to school? What am I going to do with my college education?

We all have these questions about our futures that are marked by these preoccupations of and stresses about what we're passionate about, what means something to us, what makes our time meaningful, not just to us, but to our communities. And I think that she and so many others in this book encapsulated that so well by being driven and resilient in working to make their lives have some kind of meaning that we can all take away from. So I'll never forget that interaction, that encounter, and how that friendship has continued. And she's become a great confidant of mine. And I hope to think that I'm a great confidant of hers in going over life's special moments and trying to figure out how we can get through them together.

Emma (interviewer):

And so I get the sense from this conversation that you are not done traveling, that you're not done meeting new people and exploring. And I'd love to hear if you have next travel destination or an upcoming project that you're working on.

Jordan (alumni guest):

So I have to say that I could spend this time talking about all the wonderful stories that I'm working with my colleagues at National Geographic, and if people want to check out those stories, they can follow me on Instagram, for example, JordanSalama19 and follow along with my adventures day to day. But one thing that I'm thinking about on a big scale is that I want to go to Baghdad, Iraq. That's where my mom was born. She left. She fled with her family when she was seven years old and came to the United States, and nobody's gone back. It's been exactly 50 years this year since my family left Iraq and never looked back. And I'm noticing that now there's a potential possibility for me to go and much like this journey to Colombia, there are also a lot of questions with this potential journey to Iraq, not just in terms of safety and security, but also in the kinds of conversations that I'm going to be having with people.

To give you some context, we are Iraqi Jews, and fleeing a very kind of pluralistic country at one point that has now become a little bit less pluralistic is a difficult context to reenter. And conflicts over the years have kind of changed the way people think about relationships between Arabs and Jews. But we as Arab Jews feel like we are one and the same. And so I think that the conversations that I've started to have online with people in Iraq, through friends of friends of friends in the same way that I planned my trip to Colombia, have been really beautiful and really meaningful and finding those common grounds. And so that I hope that if and when I have the chance to go myself, those online interactions will continue and flourish in real life, much as my real life interactions in Colombia ended up flourishing and expanding online.

Emma (interviewer):

It's really exciting to hear you talk about your very diverse background. It's all these different places that your family has come from. And I feel like this idea of we are the generations before us and we're all coming together to make us who we are today. And I feel like putting the energy into exploring that and kind of continuing to tell your family story is so beautiful. This podcast, our target audience really is prospective students who are applying to Princeton, applying to college. And I'd love to hear if you have any advice for these students. And was this something that you could have envisioned yourself doing years ago when you were in high school?

Jordan (alumni guest):

So no, to that second question, definitely not. I think that also, I don't know if I'm in a position to give advice to anybody about anything, but I did go through it. So maybe there's one thing that I would say. It's that when you're applying, not just to Princeton, but to colleges everywhere, is to be yourself in those essays. Sometimes there's maybe the feeling, and I had this feeling too, I remember when I was applying to colleges was like, you have this tendency to try to write about things bigger than yourself, but maybe you don't always bring it back to why it matters to you. And much like I had that experience writing this thesis that for a long time I thought I was writing just about the Rio Magdalena in Colombia and about these people who I'd never met before in this place that really had nothing to do with me.

It only took finding that connection about how it also impacted my own understanding of my own identity, of my own life, of where I came from and what I wanted to do, that it became a meaningful text for somebody else to read. And I think that if maybe you want to think about approaching your essay in the same way you might approach writing a project like this, it's definitely talk about the things that excite you and make you passionate and the experiences that you've had. But don't forget to be a human being and a person with feelings and with empathy and with experiences that are valuable because everybody has experiences that are meaningful and don't shy away from just being yourself.

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Emma (interviewer):

Wonderful. Well, thank you so much for joining us for this conversation, and I hope that everyone will check out your book and take the time to read it. Cause I really, really enjoyed it. And yeah, thank you again for having this conversation.

Jordan (alumni guest):

Thanks for having me, Emma.

Vivian (host):

Meet Princeton's audio engineer is Nick DaNoli of Orange Box Pictures. Mary Buckley and I, Vivian Slee, are executive producers. And Emma Parrish is a co-producer. Bryant Blunt is our co-host and consultant. And original music was composed by Molly Truman from the class of 2024. We'd like to give a very special thank you to our first Princeton alumni guest, Jordan Salama, from the great class of 2019 for his wonderful contributions to this episode. And a big thank you especially to all of our listeners for tuning in. We hope you'll join us next time on Meet Princeton.